SILENT SCREAMS AND CONSPIRACIES

A Short Story Collection

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To the memory of all the microorganisms that were pounded into smithereens (I was surprised that's a real word, to be honest) by my fingers furiously slamming down on the keyboard to write this quick collection.

To all of my friends who constantly tolerated my ramblings about how I didn't sleep because I was writing or editing, and then had to suffer my being a jerk for a while as my life became nothing more than waiting to complete another line on another page.

To Jed in specific. I'm doing this "for the lulz".

SILENT SCREAMS

AND

CONSPIRACIES

By J.T. Manis

FOREWORD

Before any of you start asking, no, I will not be including a foreword like this at the beginning of every single one of my books. This is here simply to answer questions I'm frequently asked about the process of writing and all of that stuff. No, reading this isn't going to magically make you a super-successful author or let loose Pandora's Box of ideas to flow out and saturate your mind with creativity.

In a way, you could say that it's pretty much a semi-autobiographical explanation, along with some other miscellaneous tidbits shoved it to make it entertaining in a way. In fourth grade my class was given an assignment to write a short story about a monster that dwelled "Just around the corner", and we were to shape the story around that concept. I wrote a petty tale in which the protagonists practiced "swordsmanhip", which I suppose was supposed to be "swordsmanship", but ended up as a type of hip displacement disorder.

But overall, it provided a spark that ignited the wildfires of adventure and imagination. I couldn't stop writing, and I wrote what equaled out to be about a page a day. Each day I would bring the new page to school to share with friends and allow the student teacher –the one who had given us the inspiring assignment in the first place— to read it. Sadly, he had children of his own and caught my major uses of plagiarism from video games, movies, cartoons, etc. If I were to even think about

publishing a bit of it today, I'd have to sell my soul just to afford the lawyer fees.

Over time, that short story grew into four "novels". I put that in quotes because the longest of the four was only about 20,000 words, which is just a novella. I don't think I even got past a thousand words into the fourth of the series before I gave up on it. These "novels" will never be published as I would simply die of embarrassment were they to see the public light of day. I'm not even sure that I have a copy of them, and that's a good thing.

When I began seventh grade, I believe it was, I finally formulated the idea that I was going to pen a massive, epic tale that would *certainly* shoot to the top of the New York Times Bestseller List and would be heralded as a literary masterpiece of the 21st century. Those of you who've read *APOCALYPSE* –and in a way I'm truly hoping you haven't— know how wrong I was about that entire concept. It *did* however, reach the #7 bestselling spot on the publisher's site for horror / thriller books.

I had great intentions for *APOCALYPSE*, but my crazy ego had to get in the way. I had the idea that I would write a novel that would entertain everyone, and I had the idea that a novel in truly epic scope was only about 50,000 words. I thought that such books took months, perhaps even years to write, and not wanting to rush "perfection", I took what I thought was my time while maintaining its quality. These were the days when I thought 100 words in a day was something to write home about and a thing that seldom few could achieve. Stephen King was said to have

written 5,000 words a day before being struck by a van, then 3,000 words per day afterwards. On a good day, I get about four thousand written, with the highest in one day being 12,000. My, how the times have changed.

I also thought that the flimsy table coasters you all have with the word "*APOCALYPSE*" sprawled atop it would appeal to everyone in a more mature crowd because it reflected realistic situations and language. In reality, it was unrealistic in a way that was almost comedic. It was also extremely vulgar. Even now to this day, I joke with my friends that I'll be releasing a version of *APOCALYPSE* with all of the bad words removed, and thus it'll only be a single page long.

Nowadays, many people just wonder where I get my ideas and how I can cope with all of the ideas (the only reason I'm not in a mental facility is because it's my 'imagination' in my head, not 'the voices') and the strain of writing so much in a day. Considering I can type upwards of 150 words per minute in bursts or 80 at a constant pace over time, it's really not that hard to write as much. In my case, it's just being able to type faster than you can think, and thus traffic jams do occur on the cerebral highway from time to time.

Some authors rush through many drafts, finishing them within short periods of time and making slight improvements over the course of the story's many revisions. Others will write only two or three –in some rare cases only a single draft— of a story, but take it slowly to tweak things here and there to make it

perfect. This book is one of the rare cases, in that these are just short stories jotted down as they come to mind, and so is *APOCALYPSE*. *The Rise And Fall of Leon House* was a special case in which the first draft of 62,000 words was flashed down within 22 days for NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) in November 2008. Then I took a quick break and resumed on the second draft, the completion of which weighed in at 154,000 words before I went in and added some other things along with the removal of things in the editing process.

I honestly would have liked to go through multiple drafts of *APOCALYPSE (*New York Times Bestselling Author Scott Sigler went through, I think it was, 17 drafts of his novel *Earthcore* before the final version was released) but there were multiple things arising that prevented me from doing so. One of the reasons was that the 100-word daily achievement made me believe that I simply didn't have enough time to do it, since I finished the book about two weeks before release day. Another was that a close family member had died just a few days prior and I just... couldn't do it.

There isn't much else to say about that whole fiasco, but moving onto the second and final point I'll discuss about: where my ideas come from. Many people say that to be a successful horror author, you need to have a tragic childhood, and I dunno where exactly I stand on that philosophy. I won't go in-depth about that or anything, but really, my ideas just come from examining the world and wondering "what if?" or "instead of…",

stuff like that.

This has caused me a wee bit of trouble, since I tend to occasionally get so deep in thought that I just blank out and stare into space for long periods of time with absolutely no idea of what's going on around me. Let's all hope these things don't happen when I start driving. One of my ideas that I might be pursuing in the future came to me when I saw someone put a glass over a spider, and thought to myself: what if that wasn't a spider… but a person? Or not just a single person, but an entire civilization?

Whoever said "reality is stranger than fiction" is absolutely right. No matter what you may think is impossible, there will always be someone or something out there that is determined to disprove your theory of impossibility. You have to think and read a lot of you want to be a writer, because if you let your brain turn to mush, you won't be able to think of everything clearly and definitely won't be able to keep track of the ten or so plot threads in novels I've been working on lately. And just because you haven't heard of them doesn't mean they're not written, so keep that in mind if you like my writing, and I sure hope that you do.

You need to write because without reading what other people are thinking, you're pretty much secluding yourself from the market you yourself dwell within. If you don't read, you can't write well, and I promise you that.

In a way, writing is just a way to express yourself and let out your inner demons. Sometimes these ideas take the form of

demonic cars or clown (*Christie* and *IT* by Stephen King, respectively) or in the form of human curiosity and the inner good of people trying to help others and the evils that it may unleash (*ANCESTOR* by Scott Sigler), or even in the form of demonic beings ready to slaughter humanity –obviously Teletubbies and Barney.

And sometimes these ideas manifest themselves in your mind in the forms of Silent Screams and Conspiracies.

THE SUMMONING OF THE THREE

AT EXACTLY 6:38 ON THE MONDAY night of June 11th, there were approximately thirty-eight people sitting upon chairs, crowded around a large hole in the ground. This hole was several feet deep, and once the contents were laid inside to rest, the hole would be refilled and said contents would hopefully never be disturbed again.

By now you may have guessed that the event I am speaking about is none other than a funeral. While funerals are already tragic in nature, the one currently being discussed is especially depressing, considering that the person being buried is none other than an eight-year-old child. A drunk driver had killed Grace Wilson the previous week while out picking flowers –a nice patch of daffodils, to be precise— when a single honeybee landed on the bloom she was reaching out to pluck. Panicking, she jumped away and tripped backwards over the basket that she had been depositing her flowers in.

The pink wicker basket, woven by her mother Susanne Wilson only three days before, caused her to fall in the path of a blue Chevy van with no hope of getting up in time. The van, driven by a man known by the name of Brian Franklin –currently intoxicated by an entire bottle of Jack Daniels and about to fall off the rim of consciousness— did not have enough time to stop before it hit the small girl. The driver hadn't even seen her, as he

was hunched over the steering wheel, vomiting onto the floor where his feet recklessly slid around in the bile. He managed to lift his heavy head only about three fourths of a second before Brian felt a small bump as the vehicle drove over the body while driving at approximately sixty-four miles per hour. She was not killed though, and had to suffer about half of a second before the rear wheel came down upon her head and instantly put her out of her misery.

Feeling the bump, Brian drunkenly threw his feet around, trying to hit the brake. Unfortunately for him, his feet did nothing but continue to slip and slide around in the gastric juices as his attention was diverted from the road and he lost control of the wheel. Brian was so intoxicated that he didn't even feel it when the van swerved off the road and into a nearby ditch, continuing driving for about another three seconds before he crashed into a telephone pole. He was thrown through the then-shattered windshield to collide headfirst with the wooden pole where he began to suffer cerebral hemorrhaging which would kill him thirteen minutes later. His funeral was the next day.

As would be expected with the physical injuries associated with the death, the funeral was of the closed casket variety. As the preacher said the final prayer and gave the final blessing, they started to go and prepare the casket to be lowered into the ground. While not sitting in one of the chairs as he was not one of the close family members, Ian Wilkerson stood at the

very edge of the protection of the canopy-tent, which shielded its occupants from the light drizzle of the rain which always inhabited the graveyard.

Ian had been a close friend of Jack Wilson, Grace's father, many years ago, and was one of the few that had made it through a blizzard to the hospital where Suzanna gave birth to her. He had been shaken up slightly about the sudden, unfortunate death, and had accepted an invitation without hesitation. He figured it would give him a chance to get closer to his old friend, since they had drifted apart lately due to business situations. But honestly, now he was simply bored.

He looked around at the surrounding area of the graveyard, surveying the area for anything that might occupy his boredom and give him a momentary reprieve. There was nothing that could be found, save for a small section of the graveyard that was secluded off and separated by a brick wall. The only entrance to the area was a rusted gate, chained shut by a chain that was also rusted. There was a hill in this area, and at the top there seemed to be a tombstone standing next to the lone, dead tree which was bare of any signs of life that could have flourished in or on it in months past.

He wondered what was so secret that had its own section of the graveyard, but quickly passed the thought from his mind. While the wondering of what lay there might keep his mind occupied by the theories, he would probably end up breaking in

or hopping the wall to find out, so he moved on. Ian's eyes continued to sweep the area and it was on the return sweep that he noticed something standing at the top of the secluded hilltop.

What he saw seemed to be a small black wall which had suddenly appeared beneath the tree. The sides of the wall were curvy, like one would expect to see adorning a semi-destroyed sandcastle at a beach. With a gentle wind that rolled through the area and brought part of the rain into the canopied area, Ian's suspicion wasn't deterred the smallest of bits of what became of the situation.

While still thinking about whatever the thing could be, more possibilities spawned as the thing *moved apart*. As It was split into three separate parts, it broke up and it was then that Ian realized that the object was three people, but how? The area was locked up, and he hadn't seen another gate or anything around back when he was driving up. There also had simply not been enough time for them to appear from the time he first saw the area to current time.

All three of them wore black robes with equally black hoods. Judging from the estimated height of the tree, he guessed that they were about six feet high each. It seemed that as he realized this, all three of their heads turned slowly to stare at him from underneath the cowls. As if from magic, as soon as the observational thought passed through his head, they all calmly reached up and with black gloved-hands pulled their hoods down.

From his distance, he couldn't distinguish any certain features on the three people's faces other than the fact that they all shared the same hair and skin color (bleach white), but there was one thing that Ian was one hundred percent sure of: all three of them were staring at him with an intense stare. He couldn't be sure because of the aforementioned distance between them, but it looked like their eyes didn't have irises; either that, or their irises were so light that it made their eyes appear as such.

Just as Ian began to mentally ask himself whom they could possibly be, another voice –far stronger and very different from his own— entered his brain and answered the question he hadn't even finalized answering.

If you mention to anyone or anything that we are present, we will have no other choice but to eliminate you from this realm immediately. Do not make any suggestive gestures to anyone that could possibly be intended as motivated by the urge to inform anyone of our presence. To answer the question which we are answering in the first place, we are regulators, and that is all that you need to know. The voice said, and for some reason, Ian knew that it came from the center man.

Why is it so bad that you're here, and why are *you here? What exactly is a 'regulator' and how did you just magically appear?* It took Ian a good deal of self-control not to ask the questions aloud or to go jogging off towards the hilltop to ask

them in person. His curiosity was peaked and was being dragged along like a real-time cliffhanger.

We usually do not venture into this realm, except to take care of the major problems which sometimes manage to escape from the higher realms guards. The regulators are those who make sure that inter-realm 'transactions' go well, you could say. We make sure that the universe stays in check and we deal with any problems that arise. We can travel between realms at will, so that is how we can appear anywhere we wish at any time. The voice said in a bored voice, and Ian had a slight fear that he was honestly not supposed to even be aware of their existence, much less questioning it.

You are correct. Humans are not supposed to be aware of our existence, let alone the fact that there are other realms. If humanity were to find out about it, you would end up destroying each other in a race to accomplish inter-realm transport, even though it's much simpler than even the simplest of devices that you have devised over your millennia of rule. To answer the question that you were going to ask following that one, we are here to eliminate the demon housed inside the girl's body, and the reason we simply don't move to a more convenient time or place to eliminate it is because this particular demon had manifested its powers into a shield which prevents us from doing so.

How much time did he have left? It was obvious that he was going to die as soon as they were done there, and how would

they kill him? Would they take him to another realm where they were free to dish out whatever punishment they found just? Why was there a demon there, and what was it there to do?

You are correct in your thinking; we will have to terminate you when we are done here because we cannot risk you revealing our existence, even if it is just petty speculation which will prove evidence to your admission to a mental facility. For example, your great enemy Adolf Hitler and his entire World War Two fiasco could have been avoided if his would-be killer had not spotted us about to destroy a lesser demon infiltrating the Louvre. Your method of elimination has not been decided upon yet, but be assured that you will not suffer much, if at all. We do not know why the demon is here, but we know that were we not here, the universe could very well fall apart.

By now Ian had turned back to watching the service, but was not paying attention to that, due to the fact he was still mentally linked to the three regulators. The preacher said the closing lines to his blessing and everyone hung his or her head low in prayer as he closed the book. The sound of the book shutting was a single resonating clap that seemed to transcend everything that Ian had ever heard or felt before, echoing down the tunnels of time and existence.

In that moment, Ian's ears were filled with a very high-pitched screech, like an ultra-high frequency alarm and he instinctively looked up to see what it was. As the casket came

into view, so did a single line, like someone had dragged a thin white Sharpie through his vision, bisecting the casket lengthwise. It was in that moment that everything froze and everything above that line was inverted, like it was a picture and the top was the film negative.

He saw something coming out from *inside* the line, and Ian guessed that it was the demon that the regulator was speaking (thinking?) about. It appeared to be just the inverted nondescript face of a person, but with extremely long canine teeth that burst from it's mouth and were almost long enough to poke itself in the eyes with them. There was also a cluster of four horns across its forehead, protruding an inch or so from its pale orange flesh.

Just as instantly as it had appeared, the demon *shattered*, disintegrating into nothing more than a trans-realm dust as the line and the inverted world disappeared. Everything unfroze and it seemed that everyone around him was completely unfazed by the event, like it had never happened.

Ian started to open his mouth to ask someone about if they had seen what had just happened, but in that blink of an eye, Ian Wilkerson was taken to the inverted world and erased from reality, both past and present. As he was erased from all planes of existence, the effects he had imposed upon people were reversed.

The major effects to be detailed upon in this short section of events start about nine years ago. Ian had never existed, and thus had never convinced his buddy Jack to ask out Suzanne, the

girl of his dreams. Six months later they were not married and remained complete strangers, and thus they could not have had a baby named Grace which would, eight years later, be involved in a drunk-driving collision. Jack would not have been called out of town on work, and during which Ian wouldn't be around to exist and console Suzanne, who would then seduce him and three generations later, give birth to the future war general who would start World War Three.

SOMETHING IN THE FIELDS

THE SCION SLOWLY PULLED TO A stop just next to the curb. I sat there thinking to myself, was I really about to do this? Had things really come this far as to drive me to such lengths? Had the mental demons –but oh no, they weren't just *mental* anymore, were they?— become so strong that this was the only way out?

Yes, sadly, they had. Through my entire life I've dealt with such things, helping others through it, but when it all comes down to it, I suck at it so bad that I can't even trudge through the obstacles myself when needed to. I just wish that there'd been some way to prevent it from coming this far, but to save the world, sometimes you have to take drastic measures. I don't want to be remembered as a martyr, and I doubt anybody will even delve deep into what's been happening lately.

I hope not, so that they don't get caught up in it too. So they don't hunt them down and go this far. Hopefully doing this will prevent that from happening for a few months, at least.

As I exit the car, I turn off the radio, which by now is picking up only static, just like all of the other electronic devices around me lately. I guess that's good in a way, since it prevents me from calling for help –I get a dial tone immediately, no matter how clear the reception for anyone else is— or for sending an

email –all computers suddenly seem to crash in my present as of late— and getting anyone else involved.

The chilly winter of Arkham, Michigan in December flows through the air around me and flaps my jacket around, and I quickly zip it up, but not all the way. I'll need the top open to get quick access to the pockets inside. I instinctively lock the car from habit, and then chuckle to myself. Why lock it? It's not like I'll be coming back, and it'll just make everything harder for everyone else. I unlock the car and reach inside, turning the light on. That should make it easier to spot for search helicopters and the sort.

I casually walk over to the side of the car closest to the curb and pull out a folding three-foot ruler and a flashlight, kneeling down towards the tire. Flicking on the flashlight and letting the beam of light penetrate the cold darkness, I measure the distance from the bottom of the tire to the curb, and smile widely when I see that it's exactly seventeen inches; an exceptionally great number, and one that should hold the universal barriers in place a bit longer. Perhaps the convenient number's a sign that things are going to go well.

I step up onto the curb and walk to the edge of the bridge, the sloped wooden handrail etched with the initials, sayings, and phone numbers of the area's youth, present and past. I can't help but count to the seventeenth letter and position my body so that the letter could split me in half, were it a blade. Noticing that the

letter is a “Z”, I can’t help but smirk at the memories as I step up onto the handrail, swaying slightly. I never was one to be endowed with balance.

As I stand at the top, looking out at the pitch-black pools of black stories below, I think I feel something in my pocket vibrate and it takes me a second to realize that it isn’t just the wind whipping around my jacket. I reach in and check it the caller ID, and noticing it’s my daughter, I answer.

“Simon Sinclair. . .” Rosalyn always said my full name when she was angry, and I could only hope that I could finish the call on a positive note before the universe was torn apart, “Where *are* you, daddy? You know we’re supposed to go to the movies tonight, as it *is* our monthly ritual, or did you ‘forget’ again?”

I inhale deeply. “Rosalyn, I’m on my way right now, I’m just caught in traffic right now and I should be there within fifteen minutes, tops.” The sound of her voice makes me look down yet again at the endless darkness and reconsider what I’m about to do, but then I reassure myself that I’m saving her by doing it.

I flip the phone shut and end the call before she can mention that the chances of there being a traffic jam out in Luce County are pretty much zilch. With only about four people per square mile, it’s the least populated county in Michigan, and it’s just how I like it; desolate and isolated. Almost immediately she calls back, and I ignore it as I spin myself and cast myself into the shadows below.

One Week Earlier

A KNOCK AT MY DOOR BRINGS me out of a deep sleep, and I pull the open newspaper from my face as I lean forward in the crummy old office chair and face the door. “Come in. . .” I say aloud, and hope that it’s loud enough for the people on the other side to hear. There hasn’t been a knock at my door for months, so I’ve forgotten the proper timbre needed to transmit my voice. Though the fact that I haven’t had a business visitor in such time only makes me more intrigued, especially since the sign outside clearly states that I’m retired and will only very rarely take cases. I haven’t received a call lately notifying me of an appointment, so I’m also somewhat way of who –or what— lies beyond the door.

I wait several seconds and I see the faint, fidgeting silhouette of a man projected onto the opaque window of the door. Just as I’m about to open my mouth to tell them once again to come in, the doorknob twists and jerks, not once or twice, but three times before opening. From that fact alone, I could pretty

much guarantee the person I was going to be dealing with wasn't a normal client at all.

The man that steps through isn't what I'd expect to be passing through such doors. Usually the people that come through are donned in shabby clothes that look like they would be rejected by the homeless, and in some cases are even in straitjackets. They also usually have either very short or very long hair that would appear not to have been washed in weeks. But the man that stepped through was neither of these things.

I motion for him to sit in the chair across from my desk, and he glances at it quickly, *too* quickly, like he's pretending to do so just for my sake. "Are you Simon Sinclair, paranormal incident psychiatrist?" The man asks in a timid, quiet voice, almost like he's afraid to speak. As he talks, I notice that he's fiddling with his jacket, a long, pale yellow cotton trench coat that stops about four inches from the ground to reveal new-looking running shoes. Usually such a garment wouldn't merit mention, but the *buttons* on it are what catch my attention.

I nod to him, saying that I am, but I'm not paying much attention to the verbal communication happening. I watch his fingers loop around and rub over the buttons, almost all of which look like they were added after purchase in a shoddy sewing job, not only because they fit through askew buttonholes, but because they're of all different shapes and colors. His fingers –perfectly manicured and maintained, I may add— dance around the

buttons, twisting and adjusting them, but they're blocked from view as he nods humbly and sits down in the aforementioned chair.

He runs his hands through his mid-length gray hair – something that looks very out of place on such a young man; he can't be more than thirty— and then messes with his bangs before leaning forward with an urgent look on his face, planting his elbows on the edge of my desk. No, this isn't going to be normal case indeed. It probably isn't going to be an easy one either, but at least it's certainly an interesting one, I can already tell.

"First, you may not believe what I'm about to tell you, but I assure you that it is one-hundred-percent completely true." He begins, just as all of my previous patients have, but unlike all of my previous patients, there isn't an insane look in his eyes, and for that I have begun to actually believe him. "All I can say is that the universe is at. . ."

At first I think the pause is just a natural one, created for the purpose of allowing time for him to think, but then his hands shoot out from caressing the buttons and clasp onto the newspaper and stack of pencils on my desk. He carefully folds the newspaper the correct way and then places the pencils on top, with all of the ends touching, forming a squarish shape.

He leans back, away from the formation, like an artist might do after finishing his or her magnum opus, then resumes his previous posture when he noticed I was looking at him

suspiciously. “The universe is at war. With what? I don’t know. Maybe itself, maybe some other force that we don’t know about. Or perhaps we know about it, but we just don’t know about its powers. . .”

It’s at this time that I start to think that maybe I was wrong and that maybe this will be just another basket case. Of course, I don’t even know his name, so I interrupt him to ask.

He looks up at me, obviously frightened, afraid of something. “Oh. . . my. . . *name*” he says it like it’s some sort of burden from an old part of his life, “you may call me DiZ, I suppose.”

“DiZ?” I ask, and yeah, right now I’m convinced this guy’s crazy. “Is that your real name, and if so, how do you spell it, exactly?” This question seems to fumble his brain for a second, and an empty glaze comes across his eyes for a split second, and vanishes just as suddenly as it first appeared.

He opens his mouth to speak, but then closes it only to open a half-second later. “Yes, I suppose that is my real name, if a name could ever be real. If you think about it, it’s just a title given to us at birth to prevent confusion with others. And you spell it. . .” He pauses for three seconds, almost exactly, “Capital ‘D’, lowercase ‘i’, and uppercase ‘Z’. yes, I suppose that shall do.”

"Okay, well. . . 'DiZ', I'll need some more information before I begin your analysis, and I'll have to schedule an appointment, maybe sometime next—"

"Simon. . . er, Mr. Sinclair, in case you don't realize how urgent this all is, let me put it in perspective for you. If you don't help me, if *we* don't help each other, everything we know will vanish, will be consumed by the darkness! I can understand why you might think that I'm going insane, due to the nature of your job, but I assure you, this is no mere joke nor delusion."

It's at this time that my eyes start to wander around the room as they usually do when I'm listening to a stereotypical patient ramble on the same stuff they all do. I notice that it's already a quarter past five, and since I usually try to be home by half-past, I figure I better wrap this up for tonight.

"Uh. . . hey, it's around that time for me to leave, how about I schedule you in for an appointment tomorrow? How's two-thirty sound?" I ask him.

He looks like he's about to protest it, but then nods in agreement solemnly. "Yes. . . I suppose I'll be here around then. . . thank you. . . just hopefully time doesn't run out between now and then."

He stands up and walks to the door quickly, then repeats his stunt with the doorknob performed earlier, and leaves. I see his shadow hovering around the outside of the door for a few seconds before he finally moves on.

For several moments I sit there wondering if I should even come back tomorrow, wonder why I even come back at all. I'm retired, but of course there's time to fill that would otherwise be occupied by boredom, so I decide I might as well return to see what this 'DiZ' has to say.

2

I RETURN ABOUT TWO HOURS LATER after noticing I forgot some files behind, and am only slightly surprised when I see DiZ sitting outside on the steps leading up to the front door, crouched over and waiting. I decide to simply drive on and return home, and I figure I don't really need the files tonight. I drive off without him noticing.

3

APPROXIMATELY EIGHTEEN HOURS AFTER I FIRST left the building, I'm sitting in the back room of the office, which is stereotypically decorated with bookshelves stacked to the brim with, you guessed it, books, most of which were on psychology. A large chair sat next to a poor excuse for a desk in the far corner, and across from said chair was a small couch for the patient to lay back onto and relax as they recalled the gruesome memories from their past.

This is where I sat now, with the thick notebook in front of me, pen clasped tight in my claw-like grip as DiZ tried to get comfortable. Every time he seemed that he was, his eyes would dart around the room and thus find insecurity in some unknown facet. When I saw his eyes cautiously glancing at the pile of pencils on the desk, I finally asked him what he found so bad about my desk's arrangement.

"Your pencils. . . there are three of them, plus the one pen in your hand equals four writing utensils in total." He says nervously. I ask him what's so bad about there being four pencils, or if the problem lied with the unequal ratio of pencils to pens.

"Simple. . ." He replies and pauses for several seconds, and just as I'm about to ask if he's going to explain, he continues. "Four is not an even number. Well, it's 'even' by mathematical terms, but not by universal terms, I guess would be the right adjective, if that makes sense. It's not a good number in the sense that it doesn't fit into organizational patterns in the universe the same way other numbers such as five, or seventeen, or even eight do. Though many people are completely wrong when they think that seven is a good number. . . oh no, not good at all. . ." He shakes his head slowly, the mess of grayish hair on his head swaying side to side, only slightly masking his terrified eyes.

"Well what makes five and seventeen good numbers?" I ask him, and I subconsciously wonder why I don't ask why seven isn't a good number when it's widely believed to be such.

“Five fits into even blocks into everything, though one of its two multiplication byproducts is bad, if it ends in a zero. Seventeen is good because it’s one of the few odd numbers in the tens that’s a prime number without being bad, since thirteen’s evil and nineteen’s only semi-good due to the association perverts have with it. Many people’s names also have seventeen letters, and a majority of those names in American culture are composed of five, in my experience. I just feel that it goes together.” He says, and all the while, my mind is turning itself over and examining itself.

For example, Simon has five letters, Sinclair has eight, and my middle name –Gene— has four. Those add together to. . . seventeen. Perhaps he’s right, or at least onto something. Also my first name has five letters. Coincidence? My professional opinion on it all is that it’s just a random happening, but at the back of my mind I know that he’s right.

“Hmm. . . interesting. . .” I say, thinking aloud, and barely even notice it when he looks at me questionably. “Have you always thought of numbers this way?”

DiZ looks like me like I’m stupid, and for a second, I think perhaps I am for believing any of his logic for the slightest of moments. “No, not at all. I probably would have avoided this place like the plague were it not for what happened back then. . .”

I ask him what he means by “back then”, and that if there’s any details to his story that he can recall –I say ‘that you

can recall', since usually people will have mentally deteriorated to the extent that they can't remember such things— that he should tell me as I can help him, no matter how traumatic or unusual they may be. He seems to consider this for a moment, as if he's not sure if he's able to trust me or not, despite the fact that he's the one that came to me in the first place.

"Well. . . up until this whole incident including this all and I knew that I was destined to save the universe, or at least try to, and I know that it sounds like something that you would normally hear all the time in your job, but I actually felt like I was destined to. Anyways, until then painting has always been a passion for me, and I've sold several of my better pieces to museums around the world, though most of it's just random abstract stuff and generic sunsets and landscapes, things like that." DiZ looks up at me for a second, then nods slightly before dropping his head back and closing his eyes.

"There's a field about forty miles from here which, according to an ex-friend of mine –I say 'ex-friend', because shortly after giving me the location of the field, he egged my house and fled the area, I have no idea why— has beautiful sunsets which are 'out of this world beautiful', and at first I thought he was saying that for emphasis, but in reality he was being literal. I went to the field, I believe it's called Brinkvale Field, with my canvas and paints, along with a video camera. I usually take a camcorder with me in order to record myself when

painting, as it usually sparks ideas in my head for new compositions. Though. . . there's something evil out there, something in the fields. . .” His eyes shoot open to stare at me, and in those eyes I see nothing but the purest of fright.

“I started painting the field, and about halfway through I noticed that at the edge of the horizon there are this collection of statues, just standing out there in this deserted field. I decide I might as well try to get them in the picture too, so I gather up all my things and advance towards them until I'm at a good enough distance so that the picture won't be too messed up by the shift in scenery. Though my curiosity peaks me and I have to go look at the statues, though at this point I don't know that they're statues; to me they just look like tall, unusual structures on the horizon.” He shivers slightly, as if a cold chill suddenly came over him.

“I walk up to them, and they're just. . . out there. They don't seem to have been disturbed for such a long time, I mean, there's no dust or anything on it, and there's no signs that would otherwise say that it's been lying dormant, but I just *know*. . . it's weird to explain.”

I interrupt him and ask him to describe the statues, and I start scribbling down his descriptions in the notebook along with a quick sketch of one in the corner of the page. For some reason, I can already imagine them as Easter Island heads.

He begins describing them, and he starts shaking ever so slightly. “Each one is made of some weird wood which I have

never seen anything resembling it, ever. They each look like the old lion heads that you'd see in a high school history book when you're discussing the Mayans or something. I'd say they're about eight feet tall, and they're in a loose triangle formation. Three on each side, I'd say. Which means there's nine, or so we would think." He inhales and exhales very deeply. "I finished the painting and was looking over it when I notice that there's something in the painting that I didn't paint."

Even though his eyes are closed, he senses that my head is tilted slightly to the side in a typical gesture of confusion. "I painted nine of the statues in the picture, because there were nine statues when I looked at them. Though in the finished painting, there were ten. *TEN*. And don't think that it was some minor error that was caused by me looking over it too quickly, because I looked again, and again, and *again*, but yet there were ten." DiZ sits up in the chair and positions himself so that he's sitting normally.

I nod for him to continue. "I looked back at the statues to see if I had consciously missed one, and then subconsciously painted it, but yet in the field there were nine. Also, the tenth statue, in the painting. It was much more detailed than I could ever even think of accomplishing, as if someone had instead just taken a high-resolution photograph and plastered it to the canvas. I thought maybe I was coming down with something and might have had a high fever, causing me to hallucinate, so I gathered up

all my things and headed back to my truck to pack things up. As I got into the truck, I looked back at the statues. . . and there were ten of them. Though now it wasn't in a full triangle formation. It was in the same triangle shape as before, but there was a tenth statue –taller than all of the others, I might add— in the exact center of the group. I took a double take, while freaking out all the same, and floored it, heading home at a speed far above the limit."

"Is that it? Did anything else happen there?" I ask him, and I feel extremely stupid, as there was obviously much more to the story that just what he had already told me.

"I stayed home for a few days, doing nothing but just sitting around and watching movies and television, when the idea popped into my head that I should check the tape that was in the camcorder. I put it in the VHS player, and there on the screen, there's just. . . nothing at all. The tape was wiped completely blank. I know that I hadn't left the lens cap on, because, well, I lost it a long time ago and therefore I couldn't have left something on there that I didn't have. I checked the polarity and exposure of everything and it was all fine."

"Maybe your camera's starting to go bad or something? Components *do* wear out over time. . ." I comment, and he rolls his eyes at me.

"All of the equipment's fine. I tested it out by taking a series of quick clips of the areas surrounding my place of

residence, and all turned out perfectly fine. I took the tape down to the film labs at Wal-Mart and had them review it, put it in the dark rooms and whatnot, and they told me that it looked like something had been recorded, but then wiped completely clean. But that's not the worst part of it. . .” He shudders, shaking slightly in place, and for a moment it appears that he won't tell me what it is, and I'm disappointed as my curiosity is peaked. “I have that doctor-patient confidentiality thing, right? So you can't go commit me to an asylum or anything?”

“Right,” I say, “not unless someone is in danger, and even then I'd only be able to tell that person, though by the sound of it, everyone's in danger, so I couldn't report that if I wanted to. Even if I did, then *I'd* probably be the one being committed to an asylum.” I chuckle jokingly, and he pretends he doesn't hear me.

“I returned home with the tape and checked it again, hoping that maybe there was something that might appear. Looking back, I wish that I hadn't hoped that, as though I did see something, it did not make anything better, not the least bit. They really aren't joking when they say that hindsight's twenty-twenty.” He snickers a sinister snicker. “I put the tape in, and the machine started hissing, like something was wrong or the tape was being eaten. I ejected it and checked it, though everything was fine. I put it back in the tape deck and simply passed it off as a slight mechanical mishap –you yourself just said that

components fail sometimes. I. . . I put the tape in, and. . . something came through."

DiZ curls up slightly, assuming a minor fetal position. "I pressed the play button, and it was like time froze around me, and there was complete silence. I remember thinking in the split second that I had to think that although it's quite clichéd, it was quiet, *too* quiet. And thus, that cliché was proven to be a foreshadowed omen. Almost as soon as the thoughts raced through my mind, the TV screen went completely black in a flash, then burst back into a screaming static. It was nothing but snow on the screen, but it was like everything in the room was screeching at such a high pitch I was sure my ears were to begin bleeding at any moment.

"I staggered around, disoriented by it all, and then my eyes made the mistake of wandering to the screen yet again. There was. . . a face on the screen, but it wasn't just any face, any stoic, calm face. It was the face of hell, and it was screaming, and from that screaming mouth came the screeching to end all other noise. At that noise, reality shook furiously, and I saw all the windows around me shattering, a massive whirlwind tornado forming outside. Though in the midst of it all, that face of damnation was like a siren's song, calling to me, and I was dumb enough to answer. I looked back at the screen and in that moment I was thrown across the room to slam into the couch. I looked up at the screen through my clouded gaze and like the windows

before it, the glass shattered and flew out like the snowflakes in an eternal blizzard to surround me. Though, the face. . . it came shooting out from behind from where the screen had restrained it and grabbed onto my, dragging me down, down, down into the darkness. Then unconsciousness came over me. . .” He trails off, finishing his story, or so I think.

“Well, that’s certainly interesting.” I say, thinking aloud, “Is there anything else? Did anything else happen when you woke up?”

DiZ nods, and I can tell that he’s nervous; he’s literally shaking. “When I awoke I was laying on the couch, and for some reason everything had a bluish tint to it. I frantically scanned the room for any remnants of the encounter, but there were none. The TV was fine, though I noticed that the VHS player was simply. . . gone. Later I checked all the doors and windows to make sure that they were locked, and they were, and even if they weren’t, who would come in just for an antiquated piece of technology? Anyways, I was checking the area, and I noticed that the windows weren’t shattered and blown out, though they were broken. The same spider web pattern decorated each of the four glass panes. I reached out to touch one at the center of the pattern, and it was like time was reversing itself, though not quite.

“As my hand made contact with the glass, the pattern started to reverse itself, folding back into itself towards the point where my hand was. I tried to pull away, but some unseen force

kept my fingers planted there with such an anchoring force that it felt like I was completely paralyzed. I started to fear that something was going to happen, and that suspicion was not without reward, as when the pattern came to the point, it simply stopped. It stopped for about half a second before it reversed itself *into me*. It was like there was something burrowing into my hand, and the pain was so horrible that I wanted to scream, but I was still paralyzed, unable to move at all. . .” By now his voice is shaking badly.

“And then?” I ask, and notice that I’m leaning forward into the seat like an anticipated moviegoer waiting to see if the monster’s waiting just around the corner, even though it obviously is.

“And then everything turned back to normal and I fell backwards onto the floor, and since I was no longer frozen in place, I squealed a bit from the remaining pain, though it wasn’t really that bad. I look at my hand and at the tip of each of my fingers were these red and black bumps, and when I touched them, I couldn’t even feel it, like it wasn’t a part of me at all. I quickly retreated to the restroom where I furiously tried washing my hands, and that made them fade quite a bit, but they were still *there*. Even though I’m not religious at all, and some would even call me an atheist because of my beliefs, I keep a bible in the house just for superstition and whatnot. When I finally found the dusty old leather-bound book, I slammed my fingers down on the

cover like a possessed pianist, trying desperately to get whatever it was out of me, and at the time it seemed like it succeeded. There was a slightly hissing noise, and when I looked at my fingers, the things were gone, though there was something new on my palms."

He leans forward in the chair at such a speed that I lean away from him instinctively at he rips his sleeves upwards to reveal a starburst-shaped scar on his palms. "These just . . . appeared after it happened." DiZ says, though I barely register it, along with the fact that my jaw has dropped. The level of detail in the scars is so great that it looks like they were carefully sculpted by the greatest tattoo artist-turned-macabre in the world.

At this time, a forlorn beep resonates through the room and DiZ reaches into his pocket, pulling out his cellphone and pressing a button to silence it. "Oh, It seems that I have to go now. I have other business to attend to. I'll see you tomorrow, same time?" He says, and looks over at the desk, then snaps one of the pencils in half before putting the two pieces in the nearby trashcan. Three writing utensils. A good number, indeed.

I nod in agreement and he quickly thanks me for my time before standing and jogging out of the room and driving off. All this time, I'm thinking to myself, what a strange, *strange* man. It's always the strange ones who seem to be on the right track to uncovering something big.

4

I DON'T SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT, as my mind won't calm down, won't rest. I can't stop thinking about DiZ and the fields, the incident with the TV and the bursting windows, or about those scars on his hands. My phone rings several times, and when I go to answer it, the phone either simply shuts itself off as I'm about to pick it up, or if I do manage to pick it up, there's nothing but fuzzy static. This repeats itself so many times that I lose count after twelve. I turn the TV on, hoping that there's something on that might hold my interest, and also hoping that the screen won't explode and a demon won't drag me to the depths of Hades. But alas, when I turn it on, nothing but static. I finally simply turn over and force my head into the pillow before I loose consciousness.

5

THE NEXT MORNING, AS I'M SITTING in my office waiting for DiZ to arrive, I brisk through the newspaper trying to see if anything interesting has been happening lately. I nearly have a heart attack when I come to the obituaries and see DiZ's face at the top. No name is listed for him, but it says that he died last night of unknown reasons. I can't help but think that maybe he was telling the truth, and that some seriously bizarre things

happened to him, but then remember the nature of my job and force it from my mind.

6

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, MY mind starts to wander back to him and what he was talking about, with numbers and the sort. The phone still doesn't work, just as the TV refuses to show anything but static. Both of the computers I've tried have instantly crashed, but I'm not worrying about the information lost; I'm only thinking about what it all means.

As I aimlessly wander throughout my house, I find myself counting things to make sure that there are good numbers so that things will stay in place in the universe. I try to banish such thoughts from my mind, and once even rearrange the room to make it all numerically Feng Shui. Maybe all the time on the job finally has started to affect me. The only way to make sure about it is to go to Brinkvale Field and find out once and for all what's going on. I take off for the next few days, and plan to go there tomorrow.

7

THE NEXT DAY, AFTER ABOUT AN hour of driving and trying to find out where it's at, I finally discover the peaceful old

field. It seems there were a few thing that DiZ failed to mention. For example, there's absolutely no wildlife there, and it's completely silent. My mind goes back to him thinking about the cliché of it being quiet, *too* quiet and I can feel my heartbeat racing.

In the distance I can see what I think are the statues he's talking about, and I drive towards them, stopping when I'm about a hundred and fifty feet away. I get out and walk up to them, noticing that it seems like time's slowing as I advance toward them. The statues are just as he described, and my mental vision of them being like the Easter Island heads isn't too far off, as these look like wooden, savage versions of them. The statues have what appears to be fangs, and I notice that on one of them – it looks somewhat like a tiger head— there is a dark, crimson liquid on one of it's fangs.

I walk up to the statue, not really noticing it's the one at the point of the triangle, and reach out, touching the substance. In shock, I pull my hand away quickly as I notice the liquid is still warm and thick, and since it's winter, it shouldn't really be warm at all. I run it between my fingers and sniff it.

Blood. Warm blood. And in the middle of the liquid is a stitch of yellow cotton. The type you'd find in a trench coat.

At that exact moment a chilly wind comes blowing through the field. Though there is no grass left uncovered by the snow, the sound of wind blowing through grass comes into my

ears just as the same wind blows through the open mouths of the statues. The sound that emanates from the statues is a low, melodic tone that seems to shake the air around me, and I turn to look around at the nine statues.

Except there aren't nine statues anymore. In the center of the formation, just as DiZ described, is a tenth statue, but this statue isn't like the others. This statue is much taller, and it's. . . it's. . . moving. It's moving towards me, and only then do I notice that it isn't so much a statue as it is a creature, a robed, hooded creature born from the depths of darkness.

Though that isn't the scariest thing about it. It seems the area around it is being warped, like the threads of reality are being worn away and things are seeping through the now semi permeable cloth of reality. As the creature walks towards me, the snow all around us melts to reveal green grass underneath. The grass dies immediately.

Another gust of wind blows through, and the hood of the creature is removed. Dark green, scaly flesh that looks almost black as it surrounds the bright yellow eyes and glowing red irises that peer out from the realm of insanity towards me. I'm frozen in place as it reaches one massive, scaly claw out towards me, pointing at me with one long talon.

I've seen enough. I break free from my unseen bonds and turn, sprinting towards the Scion parked in the distance. It seems like an eternity before I finally reach the car and frantically pull at

the handle as I jam the key into the slot. I twist it and literally jump inside, positioning myself as I start the engine and slam my feet down on the pedal, shooting backwards at almost sixty miles per hour.

I don't care where I'm going, I simply go as fast as I can down whatever road I can find. I try to calm down, but all the techniques I've learned throughout my career aren't working the least bit. I've taken the next few days off, so I have enough time to calm down. I can't believe that any of this is happening, has happened, or ever will happen. All of this, because of something in the fields. . . *something* being the keyword. I just need time to cool off from this.

Maybe tomorrow night I'll take a calm drive through the countryside and stop by the bridge. . .

DUALITY

HE SLOWLY DESCENDED THE CREAKY, WINDING, wooden stairs down to the basement, his path barely illuminated by a single bare light bulb plugged into a socket protruding from the wall. The somewhat subtle commotion coming from the upper levels was nothing more than a blurry white noise in his ears as his left foot left the final step and hit down on the floor. He would only have about fifteen minutes to complete his plans before he would have to leave; hopefully he could finish them before then and he wouldn't have to postpone the denouement of it all.

Adam DeVore walked to the center of the basement, which was pretty much desolate. There wasn't really any reason for a person to venture down there anymore, so that was why there wasn't any décor around to spice up the environment. Four bare light bulbs –for some reason, Adam liked the feeling the atmosphere gained when they were left uncovered— lit up the room, with one in each of the four corners. They hung down on thin metal chains that were tied around the wooden support beams that crossed each other on the ceiling of the room. As he walked around, he could see the slight reflection that they gave off due to the semi-glossy concrete floors, coated with layer upon layer of baby blue paint.

Though none of these things were what Adam was there for, and thus they didn't even merit a passing thought in his mind.

What he was actually doing in the basement of the building was something that he hoped nobody upstairs would be able to hear. He hoped they would never know the events that were about to unfold upon and around him. Mainly it was the former of these two things, but he doubted that would happen not only because of the thick floor, but because that they were already making enough noise by themselves where they most likely wouldn't be able to hear anything coming from below. That would be a good thing, not only for him, but also for anybody that would have a slight chance of hearing otherwise.

Adam walked up to the chair standing alone in the middle of the room, and though it stood alone, it was not unoccupied. A man that went by the name of Zach Jones sat in the chair, tied to it by coils of rope just as the black hood was tied around his neck the same way. His head was dropped forward, like he was asleep. Or dead.

But Adam knew that he wasn't dead. Or at least, he *better not* be dead. He still had to get some information out of him, so that little weasel couldn't have skipped out on him. Besides, he could still see his chest slowly rising and falling, rising and falling over and over again. Good; he wouldn't have to go and capture another one.

Adam walked up Zach and swiftly brought up his knee into Zach's dropped head. He did so with enough force so that it would definitely jar him up, if not at least awaken him, but not so

much that it would cause him to squirm and have the chair fall backwards; that would have only made things much more difficult. Zach thrashed his head around, and tried to scream, but then seemed to realize the ball gag that Adam had placed in his mouth before hooding him.

Crouching down to the level where when Zach could see, he would be at eye-level with Adam, he reached up and jerked the hood off. It was easier than he'd thought it'd be, mainly because he hadn't tied the knot on the rope as tight he as could have. Zach's short hair finally fell down to lay on his scalp, and it looked like it was a small island of hair sprouting out from a single point at the top of his head. Light blue eyes with flecks of brown and pools of fear looked up at Adam with a pleading stare.

Adam imagined that he might look somewhat intimidating. Standing six feet and four inches tall, he was at least eight inches taller than Zach, though it was harder to tell exactly since they were both in stances that compromised their height. Adam's own brown hair hung down in long curls that ended just above green irises which now stared down at Zach with a contempt rage. His nostrils flared, and when he did so, it emphasized the distinct crook that his nose had from when it had healed after it was beaten in with a brick four years ago. His long black robes didn't help to make Zach any more assured of his fate, not that he really had any say in at anyway.

"Now. . . I'm going to untie your gag, and if your tone raises above what would be considered 'conversational levels of the casual nature' I will be forced to slam it back into your mouth and beat you to death to make sure that you never make another noise again, do I make myself clear? You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, Zach-ey boy, and because of that. . . I'm going to make you pay." Adam said in a voice cold with malice intent as he reached behind Zach's head and unclasped the gag, pulling away the black straps and freeing his mouth. As he pulled it out, a long, thick strand of saliva slowly dripped down onto the floor, though some still hung on to hang down several inches, almost reaching the floor; tickling its surface as he slowly put the gag aside. It dropped to the floor to land in a puddle of saliva, which caused the dusty, dirty flood to adhere to its red surface.

"Listen, whatever you want, I'll tell you, just don't hurt me." Zach pleaded with him, his voice becoming slightly high in both pitch and volume.

"Such a clichéd line to speak at a time like this. Though remember to watch your tone with me, I don't want to have to put you out of commission, especially since you're one of our best rats on the streets. Or at least. . . you *were*." Adam said as he dropped down to a stance where he was almost kneeling.

"Adam, please! Just tell me what I did! I'll go and apologize to Jimmy; I'll make it right! I swear it!" Zach's volume rose a bit higher than he would allow, and Adam turned towards

the ball gag lying on the ground. Zach's eyes caught where Adam was looking and he instantly shut up, his jaw clenching tight to assure himself that he wouldn't speak anymore.

"I warned you. . ." Adam said, pulling the gag from the floor –in the corner of his eye, he could see the large specks of dirt clinging to the ball part at just the right place where it would be in Zach's mouth— and holding it just beyond his lips. "Open up." He added sternly, and Zach reluctantly opened his mouth. As soon as his lips were parted enough, Adam forced it into his mouth and he grimaced in disgust. That dirt must have tasted delicious.

"I told you not to let it all get above conversational levels. I guess I shouldn't have used big words like that around a street rat like you." Adam said as he slowly turned and walked away from Zach slowly, raising his hands up to his chest and cracking his knuckles. "I admit, it must be slightly my fault, but you're wasting my time, and time is not something I have a lot of." He continued as he stopped. Even though he couldn't see, he was sure that Zach's eyes were open wide in fear.

A fear that was certainly warranted and rational.

Adam turned and lunged forward, planting his foot a few inches away from Zach and swinging his torso around, putting all of his weight and momentum into the fist that he brought into the nose of his opponent. He felt the broke snap, crack, and crumble under the power of the blow.

Instantly blood started to gush like water from a faucet with the crank turned all the way. It sprayed into the air, a fountain of crimson globules as the chair was knocked backwards to let the back slam against the floor with a loud clap. Zach screamed loudly, but the gag prevented him from letting his voice be heard by anyone outside of a five-foot radius. It didn't faze Adam though; he had a job to do, and he was running out of time.

He walked forward and leaned over the blood-soaked man. The blood had streamed down his face and chest in rivers, dying his white t-shirt a sickly pinkish color. He pulled the chair to its feet and crouched down to look at the man in the face again.

"Now. . . I'm going to take the gag out of your mouth, but if you dare make a noise other than a whisper, I'm going to jam it back into your mouth, but first I'm going to wipe it all over my sack, so it's doused with sweat. I'm sure that will taste good." Adam smiled. "Do you understand? You tell me what I want to know, and I won't have to hurt you anymore."

Zach nodded, a few bits of blood flinging from his face. Most of it had dried or coagulated already, but those few bits remained. He figured he might as well take the gag out of his mouth anyways, since the blood might clog up his nose, and without the ability to breath through his mouth due to the gag, he might suffocate. He reached back behind his head and unclasped it, letting it drop away.

"Father! Please, don't do this! Just tell me what you want!" Zach hissed, trying to whisper despite the pain coming from his nose.

"Don't try that stupid 'father' crap on me now. And you know exactly what I want. I want to know why you weren't in 'confessional' yesterday with the stuff that we had arranged you would bring." Adam said, and reached under his robes, into his pockets, where he pulled out a pair of small pliers.

The pliers weren't like any normal pair that you might pick up at your local Home Depot for a quick fixer-upper job around the house. No, these were specialized not only for gripping thing, but also for *breaking* and *ripping* things. They had a specialized ribbed rubber grip which wouldn't become slick with any bodily fluids that might be spilled on them, and that was a substance that the pliers came into contact with quite often. In the serrated pincers of the pliers were other small sharp ribs, used to dig into the flesh of the victims. A custom job, indeed.

Essentially, they were torture pliers.

"Now if you don't give me exactly what I want, I'm going to have to use these things on you, and I guarantee that it'll not exactly be very pleasant, if you catch my drift. And you better, since there's not very good ventilation down here." Adam smirked, an evil smirk, the type that you would expect to find on the face of a serial killer just before he disembowels his latest victim.

Zach's eyes went wide in shock and fear, his jaw dropping then clenching shut just before he let out a small cry of being intimidated. His lips parted slightly, just enough for him to whisper a reply. "I don't know what you're talking about, I honestly don't. Please. . . just let me go." He pleaded.

Adam simply shook his head. "I warned you. . ." Wiping the ball gag on his robes to dry them of the saliva and dirt, Zach continued to plead for him not to do it. "I warned you, and you just had to take it too far." Adam continued as he turned from him and stuck the gag down his pants, coating it liberally in the sweat from his scrotum. He turned toward Zach with the ball gag triumphantly held up high.

"*No! Please! No!*" Zach began to scream, and Adam simply glared at him.

"*SHUT UP!*" He bellowed, and instantly wish he hadn't shouted that, since his tone was probably just at the threshold of what the people upstairs could hear. He quickly tied the ball gag into Zach's mouth and reared back, throwing another punch into his already-broken nose.

He screamed again, but yet again Adam didn't stop. Reaching down with the pliers he wrapped them around the pinky finger of Zach's hand. Luckily he had remembered to tie his arms to the arms of the chair, so that he wouldn't have any chance of slipping out. Zach started to struggle and the chair shook with said struggle, but couldn't escape.

The pincers slowly closed around the top joint, just below the fingernail. As soon as they started to come in contact with flesh, Zach steeled himself, preparing for the massive pain that was about to come. He must have thought that Adam was going to go slow on him. He, of course, was wrong.

Adam snapped his clasp tight on the pliers and felt the bone snap, a resonating crack shooting throughout the room, though was barely audible over the scream that Zach tried to free from his throat. The crunch that he felt gave him a wide smile that seemed to satisfy his bloodlust deep down; so satisfying. He didn't let go though, instead he continued squeezing as tight as he could as he twisted the pliers up and down, bending the already shattered joint in ways that should never be healthy.

The scream grew louder and louder until Adam couldn't take it anymore. He quickly diverted his attention and backhanded Zach, his hand wiping away blood and tears that streamed down his cheeks. He shut up though, if not only just for a few moments. He dropped his head, looking at the ragged, bloody stump where the top of his finger should have been. There was a bit of white bone sticking out, but he wasn't going to complain about it, as that would probably merit Adam breaking it off with another dose of pain. Blood trickled out, but not as a gushing torrent like it had when his nose was crushed; more like a garden hose on "mist" mode.

Adam released the grip of the pliers and reached down onto the ground, plucking the nub of finger out of the puddle of blood that was still growing –not only from the blood that trickled out of the stump, but from the crimson mist from above showering down to splatter onto the floor— and standing up, throwing it into Zach's face where it left a red smudge mark on his forehead before bouncing off. He moved the pincers of the pliers onto the middle knuckle of the middle finger and slowly started to squeeze them closed through the muffled protests that vetoed the action. Through the stifled sobs, it sounded like Zach was saying "no, no" in a mournful voice, but Adam continued to squeeze them shut.

He heard footsteps behind him before the voice shouted at him. "Father Adam! *Please*, service is about to start, and being the preacher, you do need to be up there!" The Assistant Pastor, Barry Reynolds, shouted to him. Adam loosened his grip and turned to face Barry just as he caught the clerical collar tossed to him and slipped it on.

"Of course, just a moment." Adam agreed as he dropped the pliers on the floor, took one last look at Zach, and began to start up the stairs. "I'll be back for you later." He called behind him.

THE TELEPORTER

One eighth of a second. That's all it would take him to do it, *that's all*. All he had to do was envision the environment he wanted to go to, then insert himself into that universe, and he'd be there. It was a simple concept, sure, but one that didn't always work out. Sadly there were times when he'd hit a. . . 'pothole' (for lack of a better word) in time, and that's when bad things would happen.

Usually he would have a few moments before the regulators appeared, but sometimes, *sometimes* he'd end up teleporting right next to one, and then he'd have to escape, and quickly. He hadn't figured out what exactly happened, but it was like he was entering another realm, another dimension, another whatever-you-want-to-call-it. It was like there were thin spots in existence that he couldn't see, and whenever he happened to teleport to a place near one, he would slip through those thin spots.

As you may have guessed by now, Derek Zane is not a normal person; he can teleport. It may sound like some ludicrous concept from every science fiction novel ever, but it's true. He found out about his ability when he was only fourteen, and became a petty thief for five years (being a high school dropout suddenly had a new meaning when you can teleport and thus

literally *drop out* of the building), where he is now, aged nineteen –that's called math, kids.

Sitting at an outdoor café in France during the middle of July might seem a little weird when you're dressed in a long black trench coat, black shirt, black pants, black shoes, and even yes, black sunglasses. Luckily for him, he wouldn't be around long enough to draw any suspicion from anyone. He glanced over at a woman sitting alone at a table across from him and waited for the waiter to come by with her order.

After a few moments, he finally appeared and placed a steaming platter on the table in front of her. He pulled away the top cover to reveal several large pastries and other things that he couldn't readily identify from that distance. Even so, he didn't really care much for French food; he was only there for the pastries and cheese. The waiter also placed a glass of wine on the table, bowed and started to depart.

As he was walking away, the woman turned to get his attention and probably point out some error in her order. And that was the moment that he needed.

In one eighth of a second, Derek teleported to stand only a few inches from the table and pick up both the platter of food and the glass of wine, then immediately imagined himself atop Big Ben –yes, in London, the great thing about teleportation is that the only limit is your imagination— and it felt like he was

suddenly turned upside down as he sped through the corridors of time.

It actually *was* just like you'd see in movies. It was basically a long, circular hallway with pastels of white and blue speeding by you –or rather, you speeding by them, if you wanna get philosophical— as lights flashed all around you. There was also the feeling of having your stomach ripped out and jammed down your throat like a rat that only makes it about halfway as you try to pull it out. Though still, the rat is there, and it's frantically trying to scurry the rest of the way down, all the while it's hungry, and so it's chewing and devouring your throat.

That was really the only downside to it, besides the regulators. He had run into them a handful of times, and instantly he'd have to escape before they could get him. One of his friends and fellow teleporter Erik Johansson had died that way; he teleported to within arm's reach of a regulator, and before he had time to flee, the regulator reached out and grabbed him. Derek had never been able to find out what exactly the regulator did, but it was like he froze Erik in time, and then shattered him into dust that scurried in the winds as he was erased from existence.

Derek finally exited the corridors of time and found himself in a place that he both wanted to be and didn't want to be. He was on the top of Big Ben, alright, but in the alternative universe / realm / whatever.

And on the ground floor was a regulator, who instantly noticed him and then *itself* teleported to stand next to Derek

He tried to think of a place to go to, but the fear in his mind and the pounding in his chest kept him from thinking fast enough, clearly enough. The regulator reached out and grabbed Derek by the throat, lifting him from the ground with only a single hand.

Derek had once heard something about you might be able to bargain with a regulator, since they were pretty much freelance. Supposedly you could strike a deal with them to catch some people that they either didn't want to or didn't have the time to, and they would let you go. Something like that. He felt pressure on his throat, and he started to say something, to plead with him.

But it was too late. The regulator seemed to realize it too late and by then he was already becoming completely rigid and unable to move a single micrometer. His lungs became paralyzed and he was unable to breath, then a few seconds later he couldn't think and his eyes were paralyzed. He felt himself falling and through his frozen eyes he could see the lower parts of his body becoming dust and scattered in the wind. There was a slight tingling sensation that slowly made its way up his body, first in his chest, then the neck, the cheeks were next.

And then Derek Zane was no more than another check on the regulator's list of people terminated and a pile of ashes flowing in the wind.

THE SOLE SURVIVOR

In the orange hour of dusk, he sits atop a pile of stones, placed atop one of the few buildings left standing. Just an average boy, he has been cast into a far-from average world, all caused by a simple scientific experiment. In the distance, another building crumbles, small bits and pieces –pebbles and miscellaneous décor almost impossible to see from the distance— at first, then large segments until it all falls to dust.

As this happens, he wonders to himself if his life will ever be the same. He thinks about how his life used to be, before it all happened. As the thoughts pass through his mind, the sun dips just below the horizon-lined edge of a skyscraper and he is reassured that no, his life never will be even remotely similar to the same way it used to be.

He inhales deeply and closes his eyes. He thinks about all he's done that day, and what will come the next. He needs to complete the fortifications on the lower floor so that they can't get through so easily, but lately he's become nocturnal, so when they dwell the streets, he can keep an eye on them more tentatively. He also needs to find some way to get transportation so that it's easier for him to search the city for more survivors.

He makes a mental note to search the hunting stores the next day; he's running low on ammunition, and has lost two rifles during the last three days when fleeing them. As he finishes

recording this mental note, a howl pierces the eerie silence – previously interrupted only by the wind— and his eyes shoot open.

Glancing to his side, he is reassured when he sees that his pistol is still there. He also checks and confirms that two of his rifles are lying close nearby; one on the door to the lower levels, and the over behind his throne of stones. As he tries to calm his nerves and breathe slower, he tries to remember why he continues to fight.

Why, indeed, since everyone else he ever knew and ever had a chance of knowing was already gone; turned into one of those *things*. Several times he'd gone down, out there into the open without any protection or way to defend himself in an attempt to peacefully join their ranks and see if there was a way to make the transformation as painless as possible. Perhaps then he could be with Sarah. Perhaps.

Of course that always turned out to be a mistake, and he would barely make it back inside his fortification in time, and in one piece. Usually the thing that would make him turn back was the remembrance that there was no painless way to go through the transformation. His own mother had gone through it before his own eyes, and after her eyes opened –but they weren't *her* eyes anymore, were they? Those endless pools of silver, the inverted eyes of demons— he had to kill her. That was just how it was.

He hadn't even really felt sad at it, as he knew it was probably for the best. But when Sarah had started to change. . . no. . . he simply couldn't. There was no way he could've even attempted to. All he could do was stand back, mouth agape as she started to transform. He probably would've killed himself long ago, had it not been for the fact that she was still alive.

He knew she was still alive, because he always saw her at night, standing back in the shadows, still in her human form so that he would be able to recognize her. It was torment for him to see her still, but it was the only thing that kept him alive.

He heard a rumbling under his feet as the building shook ever the slightest bit, which was followed by a howl. "Stupid werewolves. . ." He muttered to himself as he unbuttoned his holster, pulled out the pistol inside, and started walking towards the door.

HOMELAND SECURITY CAN'T SAVE US ALL

IN APPROXIMATELY TWELVE –AND I ASSURE you that number is a very rough estimate, since there will never be an exact number released to the public, if even the nature of it is revealed itself— major United States cities, there exist entrances to other worlds. No, this is not some weird acid trip to take you to the realm where dragons and wizards roam or where you can use the dark forces in the universe to build your own Death Star. These entrances lead to places in our own universe, our own world, even our own exact same American cities.

The reason they lead to other realms is because both the entrances to these rooms and the rooms themselves do not exist. They exist only in the physical realm and nowhere else. Usually placed in obscure places in apartment buildings –some which are built not for tenants, but simply to mask the appearance of these places— or in deserted buildings where suspecting eyes will rarely wander, the owners of the buildings probably are not even aware of these entrances existence, or if so, are sworn to secrecy under penalty of death. That death penalty sometimes will not only extend to the owner of the building, but to their families and friends; it is of the utmost importance that these places remain completely unknown.

If you were to look on the official documents, blueprints, and architectural notes on these buildings, you would most likely find a random blank spot where nothing was officially built. These random blank spots would not be acknowledged in any way, shape, or form, and if you were to ask the architects who designed the building, they would tell you it's somehow fashionable to have large open spaces in buildings nowadays; that it attracts the young, cool kids whose pockets are lined with cash.

If you asked to see this fashionable open space, the person asked would most likely agree to, but only after their using of the restroom or other such facility. The asker would accept the terms, and then go to the agreed-upon room alone. Once inside, they would immediately phone the closest Federal Bureau of Intelligence office, who would send the closest FBI agent –and I promise you, there is always at least one of them within a quick sprinting distance of these areas, they must be nearby, but not close enough to draw suspicion of an ordinary space— and alert them of the status. The agent would then arrive on the scene and detain the asker on the grounds that they were trespassing on private property, or something the effect that it wouldn't be questioned or noticed much by anybody nearby.

By now you may be asking yourself what would be so special and secret that people would be arrested –but you know that deep down that they aren't simply arrested, but sometimes even *eliminated* for their suspicion of such matters— simply for

following their curious nature in investigating it. These entrances may seem to possess a mystical nature to you, and in a way they almost do, since you'd have to be magical in order to get close enough to snoop around outside, much less inside. Only a few people know about these places, and they have to keep low about knowing about it; if a single person were to let the information slip, a large number of people would suddenly vanish from public eye for unknown reasons.

But to these people, these so-called entrances are known as "Black Rooms".

No matter what you're thinking, they are not in any way related to segregation or racial disputes, though to the uninitiated and naïve it may appear so. These "Black Rooms" are titled as such because –as explained before— they are nothing more than shadows of secrecy, eclipsed by the web of conspiracies maintained by people around you who you would never suspect as being betrayers of the mind.

But moving on from the suspicions that have now risen in your mind about who could be hiding things from you right now –the answers to the list of people in your mind right now: yes, no, no, yes, perhaps (you can never be sure with *her*), only if number two told him about last summer, and no— the second most prominent question in your cerebral cortex at current moment must be the question of what, exactly, is a Black Room and why should I care?

These “Black Rooms” can be blamed for about half of the dropped calls from cellular phones in the United States alone. This is because even the phone companies –one of the main reasons these rooms exist, I might add— do not know what is going on. If you think that maybe it would be better if they were alerted to these black rooms, then perhaps operations might go smoother due to awareness and cooperation. You would be wrong, since that would only leave gateways open for inside jobs to exist within.

In these “Black Rooms” people’s presence is rarely felt. All of the things done are done mainly be computers. It begins with the massive fiber optic cables snaked in between layers of brick and drywall, each is about a foot in diameter, which are inserted into the rooms via the ceiling. The cables drop down from the roof into the middle of the room, down into a massive server. The technology inside these servers is advanced to such a degree that the companies that manufacture it are prohibited from revealing it to the public for at least fifty years, and you can forget about ever getting your hands on it, even if you happen to be the President one day.

At any given time in the United States, there are at least approximately ten million people making a call on their cell phone. All ten million of these calls are snaked into the fiber optic cables dispersed into the at-least twelve Black Rooms located in the United States. These calls are not compressed in any way, and

the data bandwidth used for these operations in one day exceeds what most people will use in a lifetime. The calls are all scanned thoroughly for digital artifacts that may inhibit the progress of the future steps in the procedure.

If the files pass inspection, then they are converted to heavily encrypted text files via a speech-to-text program whose creator was instantly killed upon completion of the program to prevent any spread of it outside of government offices. The program involved will only make a mistake with words every one *trillion* words, and typically only in those longer than eight characters. These files are then scanned for codewords that may indicate any malicious intent in the call on the end of either the caller or call-recipient. The program scans for words and phrases from a list approximately six thousand words long.

Some of the most commonly suspected words on this list include “Detonator”, “Bomb”, “Assassination”, “Assassin”, “Jihad”, “Al Qaeda”, “Terrorism”, “Terrorist”, and many others which you can easily think of. The program then scans the file to see how many words on the list are present, how many times they are used, and in what proximately they are used with other words on the list. If more than fifteen of the words are found in any case, the FBI is instantly alerted and a team is dispatched to handle the situation. There are many other algorithms to decide whether it’s just the word being used in casual conversation or in a matter threatening to national security.

Though you must remember that margin of error mentioned earlier. You must also consider that many people with killer intent may know about these Black Rooms and choose their words correctly in order to bypass these programs. Of course, there will always be the lucky / unlucky –it really depends on the vantage point you belong to— who simply don't meet the algorithms perfectly and whose text files are deleted without hesitation and are then never caught in time. So next time you're thinking about life, love, the pursuit of happiness, and all of those clichéd things, I have a thing for you to consider. The thing?

Homeland Security can't save us *all*.

A SIMPLE DRILL NO MORE

If sitting in a classroom was all that he was going to do for the rest of his life, then, well, James Mathison didn't want to continue with his life. The whole schedule of it all was actually very boring, since it was the same menial tasks day after day, week after week, semester after semester. He would wake up at such an early hour that even birds would caw in protest to his being awake as he passed them on the was to school, only to have to go to bed equally as early to avoid being a zombie the next day.

He was currently sitting in third hour, which was, above all simply thrilling things, algebra. James didn't like math, not at all. He didn't really see much a point in it, since when would equations with variables solved with the process of substitution ever be used in the life of a marine biologist? The most math that he could actually see himself doing was just simple stuff, like how many ounces of dead fish to feed the manatees; simple stuff like that.

"Leon House?" The teachers, Mr. Illard, called out as he took attendance. It was obvious that Leon wasn't there, and probably wasn't going to be there for quite some time. He had a habit of randomly skipping days of school which would then suddenly escalate into massive vacations and leave everybody without any idea of his whereabouts. "Is Leon House here today?" He called again, and noting that he was there, clicked the

mouse and the attendance program marked him as absent. It wasn't much of a surprise really.

After Mr. Schmidt's death only a few days before, the school had called off attendance in respects to him, and probably because they didn't want the students messing around the crime scene and stuff like that. Most students had then returned the next day, but Leon had refused to show. James had heard people talking about it and spreading rumors that he was trying to hunt down the murderer because the police were unable to, and that solving crimes and murder mysteries were an old hobby of his.

James had thought that whole thing kinda creepy, though Leon was usually a creepy dude, but he didn't want to think about it all right now. He hadn't even finished his homework, so that should have been the most prominent thing on his mind, though in reality it was not. What *was* the most prominent thing on his mind, you may be wondering, was Katherine Prisno; the highlight of his life and everything ever contained in it.

They had met only a few months ago while wandering around aimlessly in the park, and the same thing caused their wandering: boredom. James had simply been staring at the ground, watching his shoes as he walked and wondering about the presence of small organisms that might inhabit the space between each stitch of fabric that the numbers of such occupation was unfathomable. He hadn't been paying attention to his path and thus had not seen that he was about to literally bump into

Katherine, who was standing by a tree, looking upwards. She had been watching squirrels dash and bound around the park for a while, and once it appeared that one was going to allow her to draw close enough to pet it, but when she came within a certain proximity of the squirrel, it darted off.

It had taken off and began ascending the tree. Her eyes had followed, and thus she also did not notice James's arrival. Her ears had been tuned in specifically to the chatter of the squirrel as it jumped out onto a limb of the tree and plucked a nut from its stem, then began to quickly and hurriedly crack the nut's shell open. Just as the animal had finished cracking the shell in half and began to toss it away to fall to the ground below, she reached out her hand in hopes that she might be able to catch a fragment of the shell.

Though her hopes were soon destroyed as when James bumped into her, he pushed her just far enough that, had she been moved only a half inch less, she would have been able to catch a fragment. But that failure was a quick motion simply passing through her mind before it was replaced with another thought that was similar to the one that was passing through James's mind in current time in the middle of Mr. Illard's class.

Katherine started to fall forward and in doing so instinctively turned around in mid-fall in an attempt to have the majority of the force from the fall impact her back and not her face. When she did this, the hand she was holding out for the

shell to fall within passed just inside of James's range. At first he was shocked that he had bumped into someone, and his first reaction to the event was to apologize, but in that split second he realized that she was falling and naturally reached out to grab her and hope that she wouldn't fall.

Their hands clasped around each other's perfectly and he pulled her to her feet without any difficulties. Though his instincts and previous plans of how to apologize were instantly scrapped when they locked eyes; locked hearts. Once their gaze met one another's, they forgot all modes of communication and simply continued to stare into each other's eyes, smiling wide all the time.

What happened after that was pretty much the typical fairy tale scenario. They instantly found themselves falling madly in love with one another and, true to fairy tale fashion, found out that they were pretty much a perfect match. They shared all the same interests, and they had both found it amazing that their minds ran almost verbatim with one another, like they were two halves of the same whole.

"James!" Mr. Illard interrupted his train of thought and forcefully dragged him from the land of reminiscence. "Pay attention, if you would. Anyways, as I was saying before I had to awake your fellow classmate, there will be a tornado drill occurring within the next few minutes. Remember, this is only a drill so you need to remain calm, it's simply a procedure that we

have to do to see how long it would take for you to get out of the building and whether or not we meet the approval of the district's standards.

"Just go outside of the room and take a right, going to the end of the hallway and down the stairs, then go to the hallway in the Language Hallway just outside of the library. Once there, just sit down and face the wall with your head covered in a crouching position. We will then dismiss you all by classroom at the end." Mr. Illard concluded, and as he did so, he turned towards the door at the upper right corner of the room and unlocked it.

The students slowly shuffled around their desktops, placing their books in neat piles and placing them in the baskets underneath the chairs. An announcement came over the intercom and told them that the upcoming tornado alarm and procedure was just a drill and that they should remain cool, calm, and collected, just as they should in the event of an actual tornado or other emergency situation. It's not like people had a high risk of dying or anything, right? As long as they all retained their civility and patience, they would all make it out alive and their manners would keep the perils at bay.

They stood up and began to trudge towards the door like it was an event that brought upon them physical pain, a cure of which could never be found. James sat at the far corner of the room, and thus didn't have to hurry up and make room for the others since it was likely that he would be the last one out. When

the appropriate time for him to move finally came, he slowly stood and started to walk towards the door, but stopped when something caught his attention in his peripheral vision.

The entire left side of the room was composed mainly of a short wall, while the rest of it was a large row of wide windows that filled up the remainder of the side of the room. These windows usually had the blinds pulled shut so that the students wouldn't get distracted by looking out into the glorious landscape that was the opposite side of the building, decorated by a visible sliver of blue sky, which on occasion would be enhanced by a cloud or sparrow that just happened to be passing by at that particular moment.

Though at this moment there was not a blue sky to look at, but a mauve sky laden with foreshadowing of an upcoming tragedy. In the distance, James thought he saw the thick cumulous clouds that crowded the skies start to swirl, but he simply passed it off as his imagination. It had to be, since there was no way that the school board would simply hold a drill like that when there was an actual chance of there being such a situation, right? They had told them to remain calm, but perhaps that was just a lie to them in order to get them to cooperate and go along peacefully without worrying about whether they would live or die. Or in James's mind, to prevent him from worrying whether Katherine would live or die.

His heart rate instantly shot upwards, beating faster than he

ever felt might be possible. It was an organic jackhammer beating at such a speed from within him that he felt that it might burst forth in a fountain of gore, like those stomach creatures in *Alien*. When he had watched the movie, he was sure that it was just fiction; something made up in order to scare people, but now that he was feeling something which might be described as experiencing a similar situation, he was certain that it was based upon fact.

With the adrenaline cocktail rushing through his veins, he spun on his heel and launched himself towards the door, pushing a lone straggler out of his path. The student shouted an obscenity –probably the only time that they would do so, now that they were out of a teacher's earshot and thus immune to any detentions which would have been dished out *were* they within audible range— but James didn't care, didn't hear. He was too occupied sprinting down the halls that he didn't even take mental note of the ear-piercing chirp-screech that emanated from the tightly-packed fire alarms in the halls, he didn't notice their white and red lights flashing around like police sirens. He didn't notice the red light that spilled out onto the walls like blood from a severed artery, like the blood from Katherine's arteries.

No. He would *not* let that happen. He tried to force the inevitable thoughts from his mind, but alas, it did no good. He jumped onto the first stair and almost tumbled forwards, but grabbed onto a slowpoke's shoulders to gain his balance. Not

wasting time, James used the man as a push-off and propelled himself down to the bottom stair about six feet away. Though sadly for him it was not the final stair of the entire lineup of obstacles that lay before him, but only the final step of the half-set that lined each wall of the area.

Pushing his way through the open space between people's arms as they descended the stairs calmly –blissfully unaware of the impending doom that they would uncover, were the only to look behind them, out of the glass walls of the staircase areas and into their death— James jumped out of the area and into the main section of the Language Hallway. In the distance, he could see Katherine trying to push her way past the torrents of students and come towards him, as if she had known that he was coming for her. She probably did due to the mental syncing between them. James finally managed to break free from the bonds of literal peer pressure –though in a way, this time it couldn't really be spoken about in a bad way, since they were pressuring him to go the right way and possibly save himself— and began to sprint down the hallway, forcing his way through the others. Though that was as far as he made it, since the tornado blitzed through the school at that second and the glass from the stairwell area was blown inwards. A razor-sharp sheet of glass flew in at such an angle and velocity that when it connected with James's neck first, and then Katherine's later down the line, they were instantly decapitated.

SIXTY FEET UNDER

"Lower the lamp already! It's hard as hell to see down here!" Jim Brown shouted up to the surface as he slowly descended the ladder. Within a few seconds, a lamp attached to a thick rope cautiously slipped down to the floor of the rocky tunnel.

Darkness enveloped all of them, with the only light coming from the manhole-sized hole in the ceiling of the tunnel, the flashlights on their hardhats, and now the lamp. There were three of them, the ones that would lead the underground expedition; Jim Brown, Andy Sturgess, and Will Blankson. Between the three of them, they had to cover at least four miles of the tunnels today and map them accurately, pressing the button on their radio transmitter hooked onto their belts every fifteen minutes or so.

The transmitters would act like a bat's sonar, sending out a sound wave that would resonate and rebound off of the walls of the area, back to the transmitter. The transmitter would then send the data to the surface via an ultrasonic frequency that could only be picked up by extremely sensitive equipment; in this case that equipment was the computers that the surface team was carrying around and planting based upon the information they would receive every transmission. They all had a rope tied around them that was in turn tied to a central rope where, if someone was in danger, they could tug on the rope and it would silently alert the

others in the expedition. It would also signal to the surface team for them to hurry up and get them out of there.

It had all started when there was a sinkhole in the middle of a South American village called Hannawulaka, which was rumored to translate to English as "Crazy Shit Happen Underground", though none of the crew really believed that. The sinkhole had been examined, and at the bottom –about sixty feet down— it was discovered that a tunnel ran for who knows how long. Aboveground sonar equipment couldn't accurately get a clear picture of the layout of the tunnels, though it appeared to go on for at least twenty miles.

How such a system had escaped being discovered for so long was beyond any of the crew, but they were nearby exploring a much smaller cave system when they received the call to come and check out the newly discovered one. They'd dropped the current job for the current moment to come and investigate this new system, since who wouldn't want to be the –hopefully— first person to set foot in an underground cave?

Being in their early twenties, they had rushed to the job in hopes of becoming famous for perhaps discovering some massive mineral deposit. They'd come without any backup crews; it was only the three of them and the five-man crew up top who were probably already dropping the reading equipment miles away preemptively. Jim and Andy were both about the same height at six feet even and six feet, one inch, respectively. They were tall and lanky, contrasting to Will, who was only five feet, eleven

inches and about twice as wide as the others.

And here they were now, just finishing their first descent. After drilling a hole in the top of the surface above where they knew the tunnel would be, they dropped a ladder in and told them to go at it, and that they had. They checked to make sure that they had their radio transmitters and flashlights with them, and then continued down.

As they landed on the long-undisturbed soil of the cave, small clouds of dust puffed up into the air as the soles of their shoes impacted the red ground. The walls were also of the same color, and looked to be made of a semi-porous brick-like rock. It almost seemed to be volcanic igneous, but, as said before, of the color red. The tunnel reached beyond and behind them to an extent that they couldn't hope to see the end of either path, even if they did happen to be brightly illuminated.

The tunnel was about fifteen feet wide, and in the glow of the lamp –it hummed along slowly, like it was mumbling out the light— they could see a large spider slowly scurrying across the wall. It was hard to see exactly what lay before them because of the amount of dust in the air distorting and bending the light into a colloidal dispersion of an atmosphere. Jim walked closer to the spider and as he did so, he thought he heard the two behind him open their mouths to utter a warning, but he wasn't completely sure.

When he came close enough to the spider to see it in detail, he had to take his headlamp off of it, rub his eyes, and retrain the

focus of the light onto before he could even begin to comprehend the reality of it. Being unlike anything that he had seen before, he was in surprise when he was forced to believe the appearance of the spider. He had known that he might encounter unusual things down here, but he hadn't known anything like that even begun to exist.

"Hey. . . guys. . . get over here." Jim muttered to them, his mind not even paying attention to what he was saying, as his eyes were still trained on the spider. "And get a pickaxe out, if you will."

"What, are you afraid of a measly little spider?" Andy asked him as he slung the equipment back from his back and both he and Will set it on the ground, unzipped it, and pulled out a pickaxe.

"Believe me. . . this ain't no ordinary spider, if it's a spider at all. . ." Jim responded, still staring at the spider. He hadn't blinked since his eyes first caught sight of it up close, and with the dust flowing through the air and getting caught in his eyes, it was tempting to blink, or at least wipe his eyes. But he couldn't get his eyes off of the spider.

"Dear Jesus. . . what is that thing?" Will said as he continued walked over and stood behind Andy, who was standing besides Jim and looking at the spider.

The spider on the wall was approximately eight inches long, and about the same measurement in width. It looked like any normal spider except for its size and two notable features.

The first of these features was the fact that large, thick mandibles reached out about three inches from its mouth, lined with sharp jagged teeth which looked like green barbed wire. The second feature was that its abdomen was what appeared to be a massive maw; a mouth open and ready to devour anything small enough to fit. The shell was split in half lengthwise, and inside were thick black flaps which appeared as if they might act as lips.

"What the hell do you think that thing's for?" Will asked in surprise, and he too couldn't look away from the spider.

"Dunno, but I'm not going to let it stick around to find out." Andy said as he heaved the pickaxe back and began to bring it down in an arc onto the spider.

The spider was faster.

As the tip of the pickaxe came down to where the spider was supposed to be, all it did was smash into the rock, breaking off a large chunk that fell to the ground in a dusty cloud. The chunk of rock that broke off was only 'bout the size of a child's fist, and only chipped off that amount because of momentum. It did that because of momentum because at the time that the point impacted the rock, the wielder had changed his attention from bringing it down where the spider previously was.

As previously noted, the spider was not at the impact point, but had moved in mid-swing. It hadn't really *moved*, you could say, so much as it jumped at such a speed that they only really noticed it when they flinched and blinked instinctually, then opened their eyes to see the spider mounted upon Andy's face.

Actually that was wrong in a way, since it wasn't mounted on his face, it was actually hooked onto his face; its legs wrapping around to link at the back of his head.

The spider was hooked on backwards to his face; the massive, jagged black maw on his face with it's normal mouth pointing downwards. Andy screamed –well, he tried to, as it seemed the spider had either begun to eat his tongue (more likely) or otherwise incapacitate it (less likely)— and he scrambled backwards, trying to pulled it from his face to no avail. As he unsuccessfully attempted to flee, his back slammed into the flimsy wooden ladder and it snapped in half as he brought it past its flexibility point and crashed into the wall.

Andy stopped screaming as the normal mouth of the spider bit down into his throat with its mandibles and blood started gushing out. The spider bit down and cut his windpipe in half, breaking the flow of air so that he couldn't make any more noise. He frantically tried to pull the spider from his face, but he wouldn't muster up enough strength. As he sagged to the floor, defeated, he turned to face the wall and started to drag the spider across the rough stone, shredding away part of its back as he fell. He grew still as the spider emitted a high-pitched screech that was like a four-year-old screaming for help through a megaphone and vocal distorter.

The noise died away soon but neither of them really noticed, as they were in complete shock that a spider had just killed Andy less then five minutes after setting into an exciting,

new expedition. An expedition. . . that they couldn't leave. An expedition they couldn't leave because Andy –in the course of frantically trying to pull the spider from his face— had smashed into the crashed the ladder –their only way out.

They were snapped out of their fearful mindset as another sound became more prominent. It was the sound of dry leaves slowly scuttling and scraping against concrete, like it was being blown by a gentle, yet harsh wind. They turned towards their left, down one of the tunnel paths and shone their headlights into it, hoping not to see what they knew they would.

Down the tunnel were hundreds of the bugs spiraling around the circular cavern, scurrying towards them. They had no other choice but to run and hope that they might be able to outrun them. Neither of the two remaining men were that religious, but in that moment they both mentally dropped to their knees and hoped to god that they would be able to survive this god-forsaken place.

"I think we should definitely try to get the fuck out of here." Will said as he turned towards the other path and reached down, picking up the lantern and starting to sprint into the darkness before him. Jim didn't have the time nor the will to protest the action and began to run after him.

After only about forty feet, the light from the hole in the surface of the ground level completely vanished and they were left with only the illumination of their two headlights and the lantern. They continued running into the darkness, their lights

bouncing into a light show that looked like a person with full-body Tourettes was manning a series of spotlights. As they ran, clouds of dusts were kicked up in their wake and their loud, heavy footsteps sent resonating claps into the depths of the tunnels.

"*Run. . . Faster!*" Jim shouted between breaths and he pushed himself harder in their attempt to outrun the spider hordes. Will shouted something in reply, but he couldn't hear what, exactly, as a loud, thunderous noise was surrounding them.

Had they not been running as fast as they were, they most likely would have been knocked off of their feet and then crushed by falling rocks, as the sudden increase of activity in the tunnels caused part of them to collapse. The noise they heard was approximately twenty tons of rock coming slamming down behind them as they ran, separating them from the spiders and ensuring their temporary safety.

Due to the fact that they didn't feel it, when they rocks came crashing down they were unaware of what was happening and thus didn't notice the massive amounts of rocks coming crashing down behind them. They didn't notice the massive force of the air being compressed and being shot out to catch up to them within half of a second and throw them from their feet. Also thrown with the burst of air were several large chunks of rock.

Most of them missed the two completely to fall and scatter into the darkness, but one hit Jim square in the back of his head while two hit Will just besides his ears. They both were knocked

unconscious as they were peppered with many miscellaneous pebbles and collided with the ground.

2

Jim regained consciousness first, about twenty minutes later. It felt like he was severely hung-over, but without the alcohol to make it worthwhile. His thoughts were clogged up, and so were his lungs from breathing in the clouds of rock dust from the collapse and the floor. Basically, it felt like his entire body was constipated, just like that one time he and a few buddies in college had held a contest to see how long they could go without drinking water or using the restroom for number two.

He slowly raised his head –which ached like the time he had used the restroom after the aforementioned contest— and looked around to find that Will was still either unconscious or asleep. At the back of his weary mind he registered the fact that he had probably been out for quite some time –a fact he would later find out was wrong, as it was only the previously noted twenty minutes— while both of their headlamps and the lantern were still running, draining their precious batteries; their only defense against the darkness this far down. He wondered what exactly had happened and then remembered the thunderous boom and rationalized that there had been a collapse in the integrity of the cave and in that moment he panicked about the spiders but was instantly calmed when the realization that they were probably

trapped behind the rocks hit home.

Pushing himself to his feet, he winced as his hardhat bounced off a stalactite and staggered backwards a half step. Jim reached back and gently allowed his fingers to graze the top of the massive, swollen bump where a rock had bounced off, gritting his teeth in pain when his fingers came in contact with the tender flesh. He decided to pull his hand away and just try not to let anything touch it.

The complete darkness of his surroundings made it almost nauseating to have to navigate around the area with only the beams of light from his and Will's headlamps which sent two beams penetrating the darkness to reveal nothing more than walls upon walls of the red rock which were lined with stalagmites and stalactites. There was also the overturned lantern about sixty feet away, laying at the foot of a wall, but that only cast its luminance into a small area.

As he approached Will to tap him on the shoulder, he kneeled down and just as he was about to let the action occur, he thought he heard the foreshadowing sound of the spiders approaching. He quickly turned in panic, shaking his head furiously to let the beam of light scan the piles of rocks that now blocked his only sure way out. Even if the ground team knew about the collapse in the tunnel, what could they do?

Sure, they could put another ladder down there, but how would they know which way to go? Maybe they'd go the opposite path and end up encountering the leagues of the demon bugs and

be eaten alive by them. They would never know that he and Will were still trapped down there alive. Even if they did come along and discover the walls of rock barricading them in, what would they do? They surely didn't have a powerful-enough drill to bring them out with them, and they'd probably have to have one flown in from one of the larger camps.

But did the larger camps even know where they were; know that they were even in the area? In that moment Jim realized that unless there was some miraculous moment about to happen in which the rocks would magically be cleared away, or there was an opening to the surface nearby in the other end of the tunnel, that he and Will were most likely going to die down there. Even if they weren't devoured by the bugs –or something else bigger and badder down there, and there was always the possibility that such a thing could, *did* exist— would they simply lay around and starve to death?

To Jim, it just meant that they had to hurry up and get the hell out of there. He reached down and frantically slammed his hand around on Will's back. When that showed no signs of working, he rolled the large man over and backhanded him in the face as hard as he could, which finally worked and within a few moments his eyelids started to flutter open. With Will's headlight shining up to blind Jim in the face, it was hard to notice the action, though it was certainly there.

"W. . . what happened?" He said as he leaned forward, and when he did, the beam of his headlight shone directly into Will's

eyes, causing him to see black spots in the darkness for a few seconds before he blinked them away.

"Looks like a rockslide or something like that, also looks like we're trapped here, so we need to find a way out of here already. . . there aren't any bugs around of what I can see, but that doesn't guarantee anything, mind you." Jim said as slowly turned his head around and scanned the area with the light. "Stupid thing knocked us unconscious before we could shut the lamps off, who knows how much of the battery that wasted. . ." he muttered.

"Yeah. . . without that, we're literally in the dark." Will chortled a little at the petty joke, but Jim didn't even seem to notice.

"Yeah. . . whatever. There seems to be a tunnel out there," Jim shook his head to emphasize the focus of the light beam on the floor just before a massive tunnel that, when he put the light shining down it, the light simply vanished; too far for it to be visible. "but who knows for how long it goes."

"The main focus is that we just need to get out of here alive." Will said as he stood up and brushed off his pants, the clouds of dust being set free looked like he had slapped several large chalkboard erasers together at terminal velocity.

"Which is far easier said that done. Ain't reality a sucky place to be. . ." Jim said, standing up and briskly walking over to the lantern, carefully scanning the area for any stalactites he might hit his head on, or any stalagmites that he might trip over. His rationalized paranoia also made him keep checking for any

spiders that may have silently invaded their area. There were none, but he still remained wary.

He picked up the lantern and with its hissing luminance, he was finally able to see well. He walked to the mouth of the recently referred-to tunnel and raised the lantern, hoping that maybe it would reveal some useful feature of the cave, but alas, it did not. Jim turned back to Will and shouted for him to hurry up and come along, and the man quickly scrambled to his feet and rushed over to stay within the radius of the light.

They only had to walk for about five minutes until they came to a large room. Those five minutes were filled with nothing but the most interesting scenery the two of them would ever see; red walls, red walls, red walls, brown piles of dust, and of course, the main attraction: red walls. In a way, both of the men figured they now knew what it was like to be trapped inside a pumpkin-colored crayon.

The room they came to was almost egg-shaped. If eggs had flat bottoms, that is. The cavern continued on with another tunnel directly across from the entrance tunnel, but there was also another. Sadly, this other tunnel was completely inaccessible to them, as it was at the very curve at the top of the room. Jim started to simply pass it off as a natural feature of the cave system, but Will continued to have his light focused on it, unwilling to write it off as something natural.

“Wait. . . there’s something wrong about that hole. . .” Will said as he raised his hand to motion for Jim to stop. It was a

useless action, since his hand wouldn't really be visible unless the lantern came within range or Jim focused his headlamp on it.

Jim sighed impatiently and walked over to stand beside Will. He raised the lantern in a futile attempt to help light up the tunnel, but it was out of range and the glow of it only blocked their view further, so he set it down. With both of their headlamps shining onto the hole, they examined its outer area and what seemed to be its decor.

"My god. . . are those. . . claw marks?" Will gasped as he saw the large scrapes into the red rock, revealing long, deep trenches lined with white rock. "What could ever do anything like that besides a member of the X-Men?"

"Dunno, but I'm pretty sure even Wolverine wouldn't be able to make 'em that big." Jim said, "But let's hurry up and get out of here so we don't get an opportunity to find out."

As if on a forlorn cue, a horrible scraping, *scratching* noise flooded their area. The noise was coming from inside of the tunnel. It was like somebody wasn't dragging just their fingernails on a normal chalkboard, but a broken, razor-sharp bottle across a chalkboard made of concrete and vinyl. They both knew that whatever was going to be coming out of the hole was definitely a bad thing, but they couldn't look away; couldn't look away and manage to flee the scene of what would possibly become their slaughter.

A hideous beast emerged from the hole, massive claws which looked like they would be more at home on a samurai

sword or a chainsaw than on a monster digging deep marks into the red rock. A large, wedge-shaped head sloping forwards towards them housed eyes that glared at them with an intense fury from being rudely awoken. The eyes were the inversion of a normal person's eyes; where the iris was white and the section that would be white on a human was pitch black.

The monster's scaly body slowly slid out of the hole and effortlessly scaled the wall down towards them. As it did so, its mouth opened slowly to reveal rows upon rows of jagged teeth with bits of flesh caught inside them, and at the back of both of the men's minds, wondered if those bits of flesh were Andy's. The body of the creature must have been at least eight feet long, due to it's back legs still being hooked into the lip of the tunnel – the massive talons digging deeper and deeper still into the red— as its front legs touched the ground.

In one bound, it flipped itself forwards to land perfectly on its hind legs and in that moment they were right when they guessed it was eight feet tall, as when it was standing upright, it towered over the two shorter men. They couldn't do anything but stare on at the beast with their jaws dropped as their lights scanned its torso slowly, trying to comprehend the reality of it all.

The animal –if such a horrendous nightmare could even be an animal— had a body that was not completely unfamiliar to them. It looked like a giant, mutated, demonic cow, with black and white spots splattered around its existence. Unlike cows, though, these spots were jagged, not rounded, and the black far

outnumbered the white. It appeared to have a type of fur that was not unlike scales on a lizard, as it seemed to be hard, yet soft to the touch.

"Run!" Jim shouted as he took off sprinting towards the creature, and as he did so, the lizard seemed to acknowledge what he was about to do. As Jim neared it, the creature swung out one massive arm just as he ducked and slid forwards, his arm reaching up to secure the hardhat to his head. As he slid, he felt the massive claws of the creature slice through the air and then a hot, searing pain slashing through his forearm as a warm wetness splattered down onto his face.

He pushed himself onto his feet as he came to a halt and continued running blindly down the tunnel, hoping that there was some branching path up ahead that he could use to shake the creature. Taking a chance and looking back, he saw that Will had slipped past the monster without injury and was charging down towards him, his chest heaving as he hauled the lantern along. He wasn't paying attention to his path, and thus he didn't see his path suddenly end.

Jim turned his head –and as he did, his light shone on the large gash in his right forearm from which blood was pouring— and when he did his hardhat bounced off of the wall just as he came to it. He was knocked from his feet to land on his back and as he fell, his light shone on the only visible path that he could actually escape through. The problem with this path was that it was only about a foot and a half tall, and perhaps only about five

feet wide. He was pretty sure that he could manage to fit through, but he wasn't sure about Will. Even so, how long would it go on for, if it even ended at all?

"Jim? Where are you?" Will shouted as he drew closer, and Jim slowly rolled into a crawling position so that he was facing the tunnel.

"Down here, and we're going to have to crawl if we have any hopes of surviving. . ." Jim said as he took a deep breath to steel himself and try to suppress some of the pain in his arm as he began to crawl. With barely enough room to lift his head, he could only see about thirty feet or so ahead of him, and at a sloped angle, he wasn't able to see much of what lay ahead. There was a thick layer of dust on the ground here along with a few small chunks of the coarse rock, and instinctually he kept looking for more of the spiders, even though there were none.

He kept crawling until he heard Will slam onto the ground at the mouth of the tunnel behind him, and he managed to turn around slightly in order to actually be able to see him and check that he was in one piece. As he turned and his light shone into Will's eyes as Will's headlamp shone into Jim's eyes, Will raised one hand in a thumbs-up motion, showing that he was okay.

But that did not last long.

As Will was lowering his hand, a scraping noise arose in the area and Will's face turned to one of shock, fear, and pain. He opened his mouth to let out a scream, but there was nothing. He reached out his arm to try to grab onto Jim as the creature

dragged him backwards out of the tunnel, presumably. Jim managed to clasp his hand around Wills and he attempted to pull, though the resistance vanished into a bloodcurdling scream before soon. Jim fell backwards a bit from the sudden release of tension and it was a good thing that he was unable to see what was happening to Will, because if he had, then he most likely would have vomited on the spot and then had to crawl through it.

The creature dragged Will out by the right leg, the claw sinking deep into the flesh and being doused in blood which left long trails on the dusty floor of the cave, creating a jelly made from his bodily fluids which he was then pulled through. It lifted him effortlessly as he screamed for god, dear god, to help him and put him out of his misery before he had to suffer anymore excruciating pain.

But on this particularly sunny June afternoon, God wasn't listening.

The creature tossed him up into the air, flipping him. As he fell and hoped that maybe the creature had thought twice about killing him, the creature brought its massive talons inwards like a giant bear trap, snapping and slicing through bones as it punctured him in more ways than people would think possible. Will tried to scream, but the blood flowing up to gurgle in his throat prevented him from even beginning to do so. The nightmarish demon raised its head back as it opened its mouth before it brought the rows upon rows of razor-sharp teeth down into Will's body, snapping his entire like a series of twigs under a

giant rolling pin. It wasn't done with him though, as the last thoughts to pass through his clouded mind was the monster still holding onto him while bringing its head upwards, ripping his head and spinal cord out of his skin to slide down the back of the demon's throat.

All that Jim saw of this was the massive puddles of blood falling to splatter onto the ground as the breaking, snapping cracks reverberated throughout the air. He tried to force himself not to think of anything that might have happened, and thus he turned back to where he was originally crawling and continued on.

3

It was a long time before he finally grew tired of crawling – probably about an hour or so— and simply dropped into the dust to collapse in exhaustion. Extremely tired and dehydrated, he thought he was simply hallucinating when far in the distance he thought he saw daylight. It could have been artificial light, but somehow he just *knew* that he had finally found a way to the surface.

As if to confirm his suspicions, as he continued crawling forward, a wind blew through the small tunnel and the dust blew up to expand into a cloud that packed the entire tunnel. He coughed and pulled his shirt up over his nose to block out the dust. Now that he knew that there was freedom up ahead, he

gained a second wind and continued crawling faster than before with the newfound energy.

Jim kept crawling until finally he could feel the fresh breeze upon his face and he pushed himself to get out of there. He had to squint to be able to see as he drew close, as the outside light completely blinded him due to the contrast from almost complete darkness to the opposite. Crawling out into the open, he breathed in a deep breath of fresh air and pushed himself to his feet, falling backwards to lean against the wall above the miniature tunnel.

He closed his eyes for a moment to allow them to rest before he finally opened them to find out where he was. To his immediate left was a natural jagged wall of rock, and above which he could see the bright, open skies and forests that waited below. Obviously quite high up, it surprised him when he looked directly ahead of him and found that there was a tall white building, which appeared to be a church.

Jim was overcome with joy from finally being free of that accursed place and he took off, running towards the building with his arms wide open, as it he was going to literally hug the building.

But then he stopped when he saw the shape moving slowly over the top of the building to descend at the same speed. It was not just one, but at least four of the massive lizard-like creatures from before.

His eyes noticed that the door to the building was moving

slightly, like someone was trapped inside and trying to force their way out. Even if it were a friendly entity, what could he do? The creatures were going to tear him apart probably before he even took another step. It seemed that the object inside wanted to satisfy his curiosity and the door was blown open as not a person stepped out, but another massive flock of spiders.

And in that moment, Jim Brown knew that he was completely, one-hundred-percent screwed.

THE PHILOSOPHER

The answer simply had to be there. It had to be. There was no logical explanation for it not to be there, though there also wasn't a logical reason for it to be there. It was a dual-edged blade of reason, but if swung correctly could prove profitable not only for him, but for all of mankind. Though it was somewhat martyr-ish, with him sacrificing so much of himself –not only his time in general, and that was valuable enough, but time that he could be spending trying to win over Maria, the love of his life, but that's to be described in a different time and a different place— for the possible wellbeing of others.

But most unfortunately, the unwelcome presence of the qualifier "possible" had to be. It wasn't for certain if his plan would work, or even if the basic components of it existed, but if they did and his plot was successful, then everything would change. It's always the "what if" questions that bring us spiraling down into a depression at thinking of what could be instead of what is.

Though it is mainly what he focuses on, not only personally but professionally and educationally, these things aren't at the forefront of Mark Kleibold's mind as he frantically flips through the yellowed, worn and tattered pages of old psychology books in the middle of the New York Public Library. Even though it's quite late at night –two AM to be precise— it isn't dark in the least bit due to the rows of overhead illuminating

chandeliers and the massive array of lamps he's pulled around him. There was only supposed to be one lamp per person, but since there wasn't anybody else around besides a few late-night study addicts like himself –most of which had done the same thing as him in the way of lamp formations— he doubted there would be anybody complaining about it.

What Mr. Kleibold is looking for is not some new invention secluded in the very back of recent technology journals –hence the whole tattered page thing earlier— that perhaps only a few souls had quested for in their adventures of knowledge, but something that had been sought after by many over the millennia of humankind. What he is looking for is none other than the Philosopher's Stone. No, not the plot device of the first Harry Potter novel or something from a cartoon, but a mythical stone fantasized about for centuries by alchemists and scientists. An elixir of life, if you will.

The Philosopher's Stone is both an object of holy divinity and of demonic ungodliness, depending on where your faith originates from and whether you believe or not in magic. With the otherwise-unattainable power of the Philosopher's Stone, base metals of pettiness such as iron and bronze can be turned into precious metals such as gold, silver, and platinum, all with the power of transmutation. Or, if you were evil, you could simply use it's power to turn yourself into a literal weapon of mass destruction, using your own body as transmutation material to become a god, following the logic that corruptible metals such as

those mentioned before could be turned into incorruptible substances just as those aforementioned.

Though for centuries it's been sought after, nobody has even come close to actually obtaining one. Many have thought they have come close, but they all turn out to be basic chemistry and nothing groundbreaking. None of them have been successful. None, until now. He'd been trying for several months, and had never really even thought that it was a reachable goal, but with recent progress, he thought it might actually be plausible.

And now he was so close to figuring it out. Sadly, he would never get the chance to publish any of the information or put any of his theories to the test. As he was hunched over his books, a figure approached from behind while staying completely unseen and otherwise unnoticed by Mark.

He wasn't aware of them until he felt the cold barrel of a gun pressed against the back of his head, and his heart froze in place as he turned to see who it was.

"Nuh-uh, you're going to die right now, you plagiarizing piece of scum." The figure said as they fired the gun and splattered the philosopher's brains onto one of the miscellaneous Sigmund Freud books lying on the desk.

THE TRUE DANGERS OF TOUCHING YOURSELF

"And another championship victory goes to you, sir, congratulations for your victory in the third row straight." The official judge of the checkers competition congratulated the elderly man who sat at the card table across from the now runner-up.

Jackson Ricker, at the age of sixty-two, could hardly contain his excitement. True, he wasn't showing any signs of being excited; no smiles, no comforting words to his inferior, nothing of that sort. But I assure you, deep inside he was excited for finally winning the competition and getting past a goal that he had been worrying about for the last three months.

He sat there in his three-piece suit, the black color in contrast to his pale white skin and even paler white hair which was grown out in a thin Santa Claus style. He wore shined leather shoes, and leather gloves. The gloves never came off of his hands, ever. They remained there for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. You get the point. The reason why Mr. Ricker always wore these gloves was never known to anybody until one bold child took the initiative to find out.

This child was sixteen year-old Chuck Greene, the runner-up of the checkers competition. He hadn't planned on losing, as

he had spent the last two weeks plotting all of his strategies and what would do if his opponent moved where. And thus he was somewhat surprised when he had lost the match, something that he had not anticipated in the least bit. Still, he had been raised to be a 'good sport' and all of that calm, peaceful crap, though in reality he wanted to fold up the checkers board and bludgeon the old man to death with it. He had taken away his pride, and that was something that could not be forgiven.

In a rush of fury, Chuck jumped from his seat and taking his opponent by complete surprise, reached out for his hand. Though he had known that Mr. Ricker would not voluntarily offer his hand in a handshake of respect or whatever it was they were supposed to shake over, so he did what any rash boy would do in that situation.

He reached out for the elderly man's hand and ripped the glove off before tossing away the glove and shaking his hands in a double-handed handshake. He smiled as he did this, and that smile vanished whenever he saw the reaction on the man's face; one of absolute shock and horror. Chuck slowly lowered the man's hand as his grip loosened and Jackson ripped it away, reaching down and grabbing the glove, slipping it on as hastily as possible as he turned and sprinted – and at a pace far faster than a man his age should be able to attain— out of the event room in the recreation center.

And in that moment, as the audience stood completely shocked at the events, Chuck began to feel woozy. Not in the way

that he might after seeing someone vomit or from seeing blood, but vertigo-woozy. The world started to spin around him, and he heard the crowd making worried grunts and noises before he felt himself start to slowly spin around and drop to the floor. Waves of darkness started to slowly claim his vision as he lay there, completely paralyzed and unable to tell anyone what was happening to him.

It's not like he would have been able to, anyway. By the time that the nearest person had made their way over to him, he was already dead.

2

Approximately forty-five minutes later, the man was sitting at a local diner called Debbie J's, and he was slowly eating what would ultimately be his last meal. He kept thinking about what he had just caused, and why exactly he deserved such a curse, but alas, there were no answers to be found in the realm of his thoughts.

Taking a sip of coffee, a bit splashed out of the cup to land on the table below as he attempted to steel himself and the hands that held the coffee cup; they were trembling like a junkie waiting for his next fix. He wondered if there was anybody out there that knew the truth about it all, or if the person that had caused him to be burdened by the condition was still alive. Perhaps they had been there at the competition, waiting for there to be a slip-up and

thus be fully entertained as he involuntarily killed yet another person.

Just as the old song goes, “these boots were made for walkin’ ”, Jackson Ricker thought at that moment that his hands were made for killin’. It troubled him to think so, but he knew that sadly it had to be the truth. Wondering if there was any way that he would ever be able to sleep again and not be haunted by the demons that plagued his daymares; nightmares during the day, since there was no longer a “night” for him.

Jackson slowly pulled the gloves from his hands, taking extra care that he not accidentally touch himself in the process of doing so. His hands had become somewhat dirty in the thirteen years he had been wearing the gloves and had never taken them off, but that would probably not be the first thing that people would think when they discovered him. With a deep breath and a tear in his eye, Jackson Ricker slowly clasped his hands together on the table, his fingers intertwining into one massive bunch of saggy, wrinkly flesh.

And thus the chain of reactions began. First, his heart instantly stopped and his eyes began to decay at such a rapid pace that by the time that any medical teams had arrived, the rot would have spread and caused him to be nothing more than a puddle on the ground. In that moment, his brain also shut down completely and his head fell backwards to knock against the top of the chair.

He figured perhaps he should have written something down explaining himself, because now nobody would know the true

curse of touching yourself.

HOLY HYMNS AND HAND GRENADES

"Religion is just select plagiarism for the masses of mindless sheep" - unknown

"Our father in heaven, hallow be thy name, thine kingdom come." Armistice Jenkins mumbled to himself in the backseat of the Cadillac, thinking about what was about to happen and praying to god that he would be able to make it out alive.

"Oh c'mon already, Father Jenkins, if we're going to do this, then we're going to have to bypass all the religious bullyrag and just get it over done already. We have all of the equipment here, we have all of the maps, we have everything we need, so why don't get just go and get it over with?" Luke Damon said, sitting next to him.

"Luke, if we are going to attempt this and hope to be successful, we shall need all the help we can get. Jesus can help us far more than anyone else ever can, so be patient, please." Armistice said as he raised his head and pulled the rosary from his hands to tuck it into his pocket. He nodded solemnly as he looked at Luke, "Now, if we truly believe, then we should be able to pull this off. Do you have all of the equipment?" It was a rhetorical question, since he *knew* that he had the equipment, though if he *didn't*, then he'd just have take him back to the confessional booth for some true bible bashin'.

"Of course I have the equipment! Now can we please just get this over with? The prime minister's knowing that we're

going to do this at this time, so we need to hurry up and get it over with so that he can help us evade getting caught!" Luke said as he reached into the backseat of the Lincoln and pulled out a black duffel bag. True, it was a stereotypical container for bad things, but it did the job exceptionally well.

Inside the duffel bag lay two MP5 silenced submachine guns for taking out any hostages that may need to be eliminated quickly and quietly. There were also several types of plastique explosives which they would use to literally blow the place as they made their escape. Among this collection sat twelve fragmentation grenades that well, just weren't legal in any way, shape, or form. How the church managed to amass such a collection of them is a question the answer to which you will probably never know, along with all of the others who may read about this incident.

The two men said one last final prayer, and then made their final preparations for what would become one of the largest bank heists in recorded history.

2

Prime Minister Kyle Cainlin sat in the small, cramped office at his desk. Across from the desk was his long-time friend and consultant Dexter House.

"So. . . are you actually going to tell me what's going on, or are you just going to drag me along and hold it over my head

until my curiosity gets too bad?" Dexter asked him, referring to the reason that he had been brought there. Two days ago while in India, Dexter had received a call from Kyle and said that there were going to be some massive things going on within the next few days and that Kyle needed him there in order to help coordinate some of those events.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you in only. . ." Kyle pulled back the sleeve to his suit and checked his watch, "one minute or so." He smiled a sly smile, which quickly disappeared as he furrowed his brow in concentration.

They both waited patiently for one minute before Dexter asked again. "Well. . .?"

And once again Kyle checked his watch, and this time nodded in approval. "The reason you've been brought here today is because I need your consult on something."

"And that something is. . .?"

"Religion is a sham." Kyle said with a straight face that Dexter knew would made him a card shark due to that poker face. He expected him to burst out laughing and say that he was joking, then proceed onto the real point of interest. He did not.

Dexter let out a pity laugh; one that he hoped would bring some humor to the situation. It did not. "What are you saying, man? What about Jesus and all of that stuff?"

Kyle leaned back in his chair and nodded. "I knew you would probably take it this way. The fact is that there are technologies and things that the public can not be made aware of,

and if they were to be made aware, chaos would ensure without hesitation." He sighed. "The fact is that time travel *does* exist, and several high-ranking authors were hired to go back in time and create a massive controversial story web that would inspire what is currently the religion of Christianity. Jesus never exited, except for in the minds of these authors."

Dexter chuckled again. "Okay man, you can lighten up and stop with this whole thing and get onto the real point. Enough of it, okay? Even if you were to have created such a thing as a time machine, what would be the entire motive behind creating a false religion for people to depend upon?" He asked.

"Simple, the fact is that we are not the rulers of our fates as we so choose to believe. When people pray, they release a type of energy that is not found anywhere else in all of existence, or so *they* tell us."

"And who exactly are 'they', they bodysnatchers?" Dexter let out a chortle, but Kyle still remained stoic and serious.

"Dexter, do you believe in 'god' or do you not believe?"

"I'm dyslexic; I believe in 'dog'." Dexter replied with a smile that was not returned.

"What if I were to tell you that your god was nothing more than a type of colossal space alien that hovers around the planets collecting and feeding on the energy that is emitted during prayer? These aliens have the ability to destroy us all if they wish, and due to the threats and constant danger, we must do all we can do to appeal to them. That's why we built churches and fabricated

religion, so that we can accumulate the energy easier."

Dexter laughed again. "I'm sure. Have you been tripping on some bad shrooms or something? Even so, why are you telling me this?"

"Because, Dexter. . ." Now it was Kyle's turn to laugh, and his laugh was not one of humor but of evilness and all that is dark in the universe. "As we speak right now, there is a bank robbery occurring in your main bank vault which will rob you of the twelve billion dollars you have stored there in various forms. We will use your 'donation' in order to build a bigger, more appealing church so that we can please our overlords. I just figured that I'd let you know the truth before I killed you."

As Dexter began to open his mouth and question that last sentence, Kyle reached up from under his desk brandishing a pistol and before Dexter could form the first syllable of a word, he fired twice and instantly killed his friend. "All of this because of you, the bank owner."

3

Meanwhile, three thousand miles away, Armistice and Luke were getting ready to break into the vault of one of the largest banks in existence. They were going to do this armed with nothing more than holy hymns and hand grenades.

DUSK DELIGHT

As the sun set to where it was almost a specter among a forest of dead trees, they stood there at the concrete stage in the middle of the park. It was only them, yet they were not alone, as more than their own minds were on the line for this event about to take place.

He stood leaning against one of the pillars at the front of the stage. She stood leaning against the back wall of the stage about fifteen feet away. They both stood with both their arms and legs crossed as they peered into each other's eyes; into their souls and beyond.

"I know why you wanted me to come here today. . ." She said to him, a slight frown playing across her lips as she formed the words, then fell silent.

He swallowed loudly, thinking about what to say. In all of his greater fears, he had never hoped that it would all come down to such a thing, though here he was, facing that fear head-on. At least he had her with him doing it, even though that probably was what he was truly afraid of.

Even though it was approximately eighty degrees out, a chilly wind blew softly through the area and tickled their spines. As the wind blew, it gently disturbed her green jacket, which covered a simple, light blue tee shirt. Her jeans were the same color, and the cuffs of the pant legs covered the top of her red

sneakers; the laces tattered and untied. She liked them that way, as it was more comfortable.

He ran a hand through his hair, and a few strands fell onto his white shirt, while others fell onto his jeans. Looking up at her, the words choked him as they refused to do anything more than linger as a terrible burden in his throat. “I. . . I don’t know what to say. . .”

She scoffed, pushing off the wall and taking a few steps forward. “Perhaps it isn’t what you should say, but what you should ask. I thought you loved me. . .” She said, looking aside, and in that moment his heart ripped apart.

Before he knew it, he too had advanced forth and was now standing less then six inches from her. “I *do* love you. . . you’re the one that doesn’t have a modicum of emotion for me. . .” He couldn’t stand to look at her, for fear of his heart shattering more; he kept his gaze trained on the ground.

“Then why are you doing this? *Why are you leaving*?” She said boldly, looking up at him with tears in her eyes.

“Because. . .” He sighed loudly, “answer me this: do you honestly think that there’s any reason for me to stay here? The one who’s kept my heart –and thus me myself— captive and whom holds the key seems to have lost the ability to unlock.” He said, trying his best to speak coherently as the words clogged his throat along with all of those petty emotions that he truly dreaded in those moments.

She looked up at him and he looked down at her in that

moment, and it felt like they were two parts of the same whole, like it had long ago. He noticed then that he was holding her hands together in his own, though he noticed this without looking, as their gazes were locked together in the realms of eternity.

"No. . . no. . . I guess not. . ." She said, and seemed to have the same problem of not being able to speak without difficulty. She broke her hands free from his clasp and leaned forward, wrapping them around him as she laid her head on his chest. "I'm sorry. . ."

He tilted his head downwards ever so slightly to let his rest upon hers, but he knew that things couldn't continue on like that. He reached his hands up and softly grabbed onto her shoulders, pushing her away from him. She didn't put up much of a struggle with it, but when he looked in her eyes again, she seemed. . . hurt.

Taking a half-step forwards, he closed all of the distance between them as his fingers slowly stalked up her neck to caress the bottom of her chin, tilting her head upwards as he tilted his downwards. Their eyes closed in unison as their lips pressed together and all of the worries in the world vanished away, shattered like a plate of sugar glass under a wrecking ball.

He had to force himself to stop, and regretfully he did just that. He pushed her away and half-turned towards the edge of the stage. "I'll be back at the end of summer. . ." He said to her as he took those few steps forward and dropped off the edge of the platform, jumping and landing on the ground below without breaking his stride.

He continued running into the sunset, the tears falling from his cheeks to sparkle in the sun's glow as they fell to the ground and paved her a road to his broken heart.

CONCEPT ONE:
SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK

It no longer mattered who was wrong, or who was right. It simply mattered what methods you would use to survive, and how long you could manage to do so. There were others out there that might still be alive --be *sane*, is really what you should be thinking-- but even if there were, there wasn't a likely chance that they'd be welcoming to any others, especially since newcomers would simply slow them down even more.

It wasn't like they could simply run away and flee the town. Any small chance of that was eliminated completely when the government showed up and fit the dome around the town. It completely sealed them off and made the town airtight; it was only a matter of time until someone crossed the line and tried to leave.

And thus when they did, soldiers arrived --donned in pressurized biohazard suits that, if punctured, would have air flow outwards instead of inward so it would protect the wearer from anything that might be airborne-- everybody in the town of Desparatus, Pennsylvania knew that they were screwed. Anybody that attempted to pass the barrier that secluded them from the outside world, or even approached it, were killed without hesitation. The bodies were gathered in a giant bonfire in the middle of the town for all of survivors to see, and all of the

infected to witness.

By now you may be wondering what exactly caused such an event to take place, and you would not be far from the truth were you to guess that some apocalyptic plague was sent down from the heavens --or up from the levels of hell-- to curse mankind and make them suffer for what they've done. It all started as a simple cold. Then, it escalated into a deadly virus. After that, it brought back the dead, and they certainly weren't sick.

It was like all of the stereotypical zombie movies molded into one package of reality, laced with cocaine and dynamite. Sadly, that's not a great thing. Due to such things, the undead can actually outrun a majority of the people in town, and it's up to them to survive as long as they can by simple staying out of the paths and notice of any of them.

Some people hope that they can manage to find a way to survive, while others believe there must be some method of escaping. Sadly for even the best-armed survivors, the infected that are killed don't stay that way; sometimes they come back.